

# 伝説の勇者の伝説 7

失踪の真相

鏡 貴也



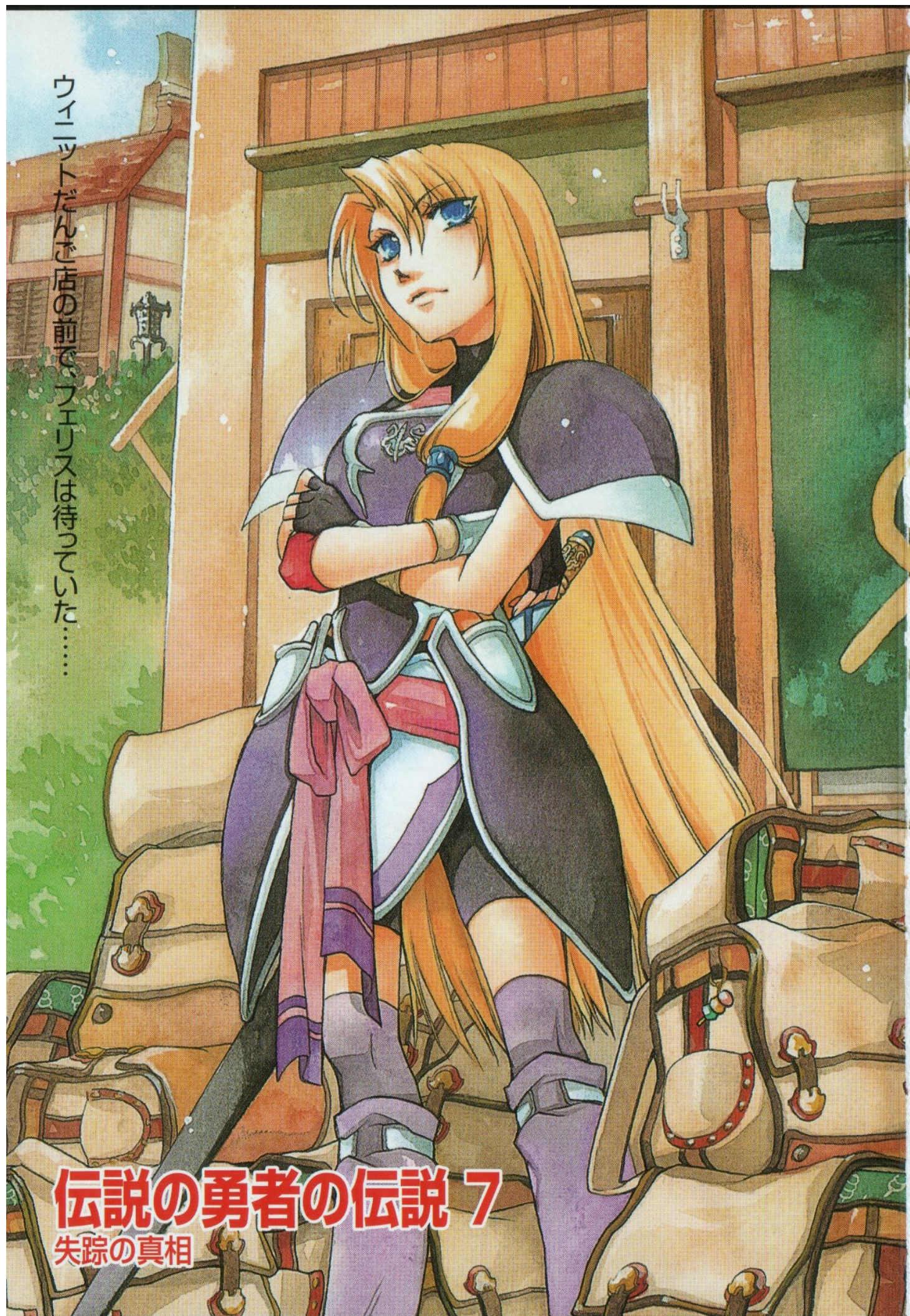
富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト とよた瑣織





ウィットだんご店の前で、フェリスは待っていた……



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失踪の真相







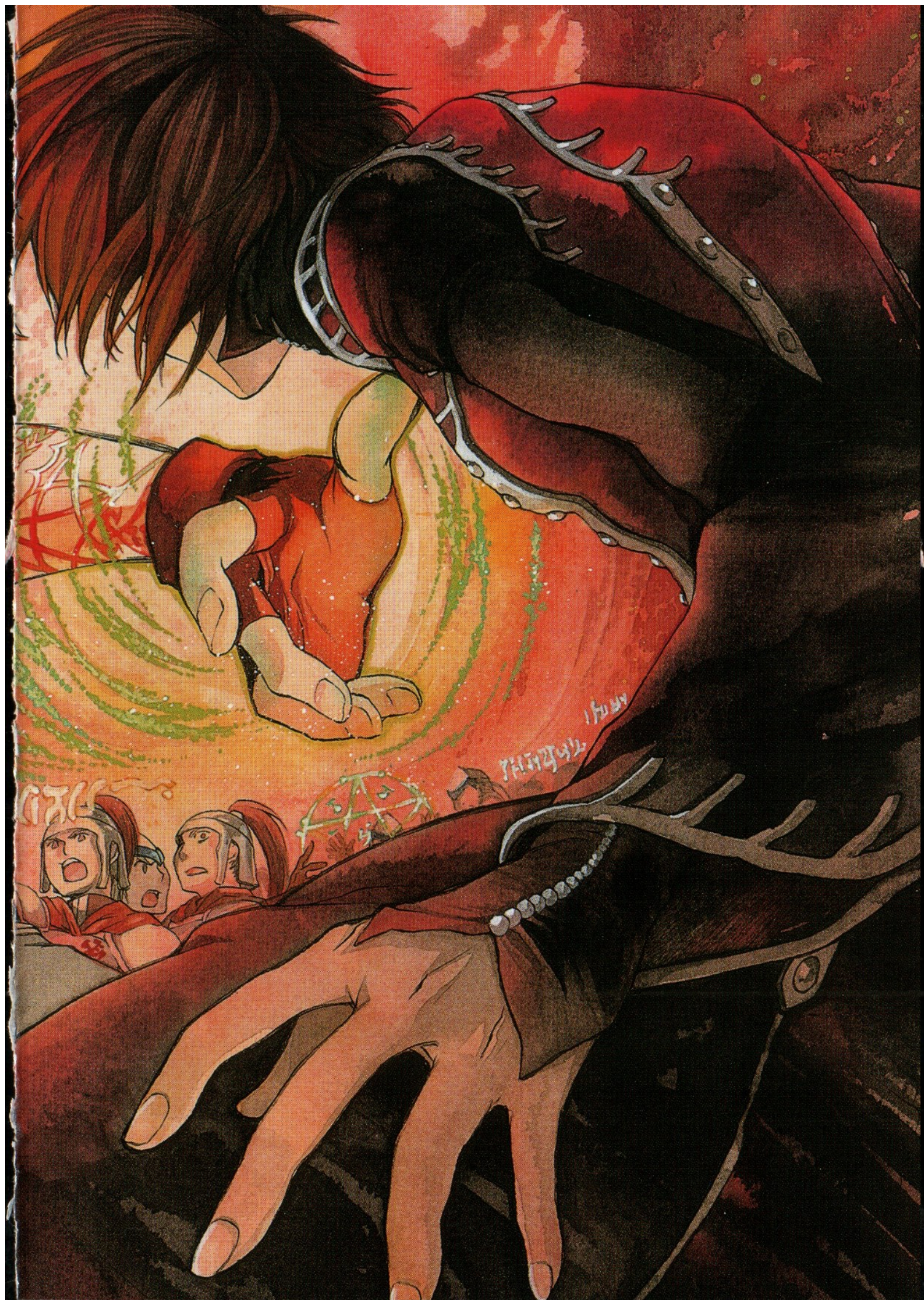
クラウの腕の周囲にある空気が、鋭く渦巻き、刃となる！

















若い、男だった。  
黒い髪に、黒い服、靴まで黒い。  
全身黒づくめなのに、床は……真っ赤だった。











# Intermission

A voice.

Within the darkness, a voice echoed.

"As long as you're with me—as long as you're by my side, that's all I need."

"I feel the same... but..."

From somewhere, it was a dear voice.

Far away.

It seemed as if it were being heard from a distant place and time.

The voice echoed again.

The first voice was male.

From somewhere, a listless, tired voice. However, right now, in an urgent tone—

"If so, if so, then why..."

Then next was a female voice.

"Impossible... It's impossible. As I thought, as I thought, I have to kill..."

Moreover, again, it was a dear voice, as thought. Somehow, he knew that even though it sounded if it were about to cry, she spoke in a kind voice.

Gazing at him, she placed her mouth by his ear and whispered in a truly kind voice.

*"I love you more than anyone else in the world. My adorable boy."*

In that instant, he remembered.

That—that was right.

These two people were his parents. Why had he forgotten such a simple



thing?

Why?

Far away, remembering such a dear thing...

He opened his eyes.

The place he was in was the same as that when his eyes were closed: within darkness.

Vaguely.

It was incredibly vague.

It was like looking into a stagnating pool of water.

He trembled at that.

He didn't like this darkness.

It was scary.

"I'm afraid to sleep alone, Mom, Dad..."

He murmured that.

Then, a lamp was lit.

Light tore through the darkness.

Inside a room.

Furthermore, it was a scene that he was very familiar with.

A well-arranged room.

Whatever he wanted, it was there.

If he said that he wanted it—no, even if he didn't say anything, Dad would get it all.

A sewn teddy bear twice his size.

A clean, toy sword.

But what he loved most was a picture book full of the world's **fairy tales**.

Each and every night, Dad and Mom promised that they would read to him



from it.

The story of the **hero** who saved the world.

The story of the **knight** who single-handedly defeated a great army.

The story of the **demon, demon king, monster**, as it was called, who possessed power that surpassed human knowledge.

They were all stories of fantasy worlds.

He loved listening to those stories.

Hearing those stories at night, and then after rising in the morning, he'd have those stories read again and again. Before he knew it, he was able to read their contents by himself.

But he didn't tell Dad or Mom.

After all, he loved being read to each night by Dad and Mom.

And each time, when the tale ended and as the night wore on, Mother would say,

*"Now, that's it for this tale."*

*"Eh—!? It's already over? I want more. I want more~"*

But Mom would shake her head, and,

*"That won't do. A child who doesn't go to bed at night can't become a hero, Ryner."*

*"Eh!? Really!?"*

Then Mom would smile. With a face gentler than anyone else's,

*"So sleep well tonight. Now, close your eyes. Have sweet dreams. My adorable hero."*



And.

Mom would kiss his forehead.

He loved that.

So he didn't tell Dad and Mom that he could read.

He didn't tell them that by now, he'd memorized all of the stories.

Instead, while rubbing at his half-asleep eyes, he said this.

"... Dad, Mom. I woke up... Read me a story again."

Whenever he said that, Mom would say,

*"Oh dear, you woke up? But today's tale has ended. We'll go to bed together, and then you'll fall asleep."*

Saying that, they would sleep in the same bed together.

But looking at his mother's face this time, it was a face that trembled in fear.

Then, it distorted into sorrow.

Pretty black hair. Long eyelashes, gentle black eyes.

From those black eyes, tears streamed.

He tilted his head at that.

"M-Mom... what... why? Why are you crying?"

At those words, Mom's face was strained again.

For some reason, in her hand, she carried a knife. Gripping it tightly, Mom spoke in a trembling voice.

"I-I have to kill him... and together with this child, I'll..."

But in response, Dad spoke.

"That's impossible for you."

"... B-But..."

"That's impossible for you."

He repeated those same words.



Then Mom stared intently at Dad, and,

"This has to be a curse—!? We've... been cursed! Like this, it won't be just us! You'll be killed as well. Your house will be ruined as well!"

She cried out.

He was surprised at that.

It was the first time he'd ever seen Mom cry out.

Even when she was scolding him, she never raised her voice.

But right now, she was utterly shaken.

Dad gazed at Mom.

Blond hair, deep blue eyes. He didn't resemble him at all there.

But his listless, eternally sleepy face came completely from Dad...

There was no doubt that he was their child.

But, that was why...

Mom continued.

"I've dirtied your blood... It can't be that my blood..."

"Don't say that!"

Dad shouted.

But Mom continued.

"My blood carries the **Alpha Stigma**..."

"It's not your fault!"

"Then—then whose fault is it!? You're a noble. As is your family tree. Up until now, an **Alpha Stigma** bearer has never been born into the nobility... It has to— it has to be my fault. Because a low-born like fell in love with a high-born like you, this has to be punishment..."

"Don't say those kinds of things—! I have no regrets. I said so when we married. As long as I have you with me... No, now, as long as I have you and Ryner with me, I don't need anything else. My house, my rank—I don't care if I



lose anything else."

Nevertheless, Mom stared at Dad, and gripping the knife with a trembling hand,

"I can't let that happen to you. For a commoner woman like me..."

But Dad stared at Mom with a calm expression, and,

"How many times must I say it—that's impossible for you. Now, give me that knife,"

He held out his hand.

Mom didn't let go of the knife. She gripped it tightly.

Dad let out a sigh at that. While approaching Mom,

"... If it's you, you'd certainly be willing to die for my sake. I'd die for you for as well. But you undoubtedly can't kill Ryner."

Mom's face again, at that, strained.

"B-But... he'll be killed at any rate, won't he? Surely they'll discover that he's an **Alpha Stigma** bearer... and one day he'll go berserk... If—If that's the case, then I'd rather..."

However, staring at the ever-kind Mom—

"That isn't possible. For you... that isn't possible. I know that for a fact. That isn't the woman I love. That's why I overcame all the opposition and married you. Now, give me the knife."

Saying that, Dad approached her.

Gently, Dad embraced Mom's shoulder as she trembled, taking away the knife and tossing it away.

Spreading his arms apart, he turned this way.

He smiled as kindly as ever.

"You come here as well, Ryner."

At that, he nodded. He jumped into Dad's arms.

It was scary.



He didn't know what was going on at all, but either way, it was scary.

However, as if to take away all those fears, Dad held him and Mom.

Tightly, tightly, he held them.

However, while trembling nevertheless, Mom spoke with a sorrowful expression.

"But... But surely... the outcome won't change... Like this, we'll all be..."

But.

To that, Dad quietly—

"It'll still be all right. I'll protect you both. I'll think of something. Ryner won't be killed. You won't be killed either. No matter what, I'll protect you both. It'll be all right.

Surely...

Surely... Surely...

There, the words stopped midway.

Again, his surroundings became dark.

*"Eh?"*

He let a quiet voice slip out.

Again, his entire body was swallowed up by unease.

It was scary.

*"D-Dad!?"*

He searched for Dad, who should have been holding him just now.

He searched for that warmth.

But he couldn't find it.

He wasn't there.

What was this...



Then, over there.

A voice echoed.

*"The sacrifice..."*

Hearing nothing else in this heavy darkness, it was a desperate voice...

To that, again, his mother's voice.

*"I... I will be the sacrifice..."*

*M-Mom, where are you!?*

He called out. However, there was no answer.

*"Contract."*

Again, that voice.

Somehow stirring up unease, that voice.

*"Destruction..."*

It was scary... He didn't want to hear that voice...

He covered his ears.

But the voice echoed.

No, it was more like it fell from above...

*"Destruction... Destruction..."*

*Stop...*

*Stop it*

*Someone...*



That voice laughed.

It laughed madly.

As if it were ridiculing everything in this world.

As if it were ridiculing him, alone in the darkness.

*Scary.*

*It's scary.*

*Someone save me.*

*Dad, Mom...*

There, at that moment.

Before his eyes, his parents appeared.

In the center of the darkness.

The moment he looked at them.

He opened his eyes.

He opened his eyes wide.

In the center of his eyes was a red five-star pentacle.

A cursed, carved seal.

The ruler of mad destruction.

"D-Da... Mo... Ah... Uu..."

Red.

Everything was red.

Everything in the world was dyed red.

"I... don't... like it... t-this... Ua... Ahhh...

*Ahha,*

*hahahahahahaahahahaahahahaahahahaahahahaahahaha*

—"

It was a laugh that invoked fear.

A mad demon's laugh.

He wanted to run away.

From that voice, from that fear, he wanted to run away.

Even though that voice was coming from him.

*Curse.*

He thought.

*This is a curse.*

A mad demon laid a curse on the world.

Despite being mad, a demon that wouldn't die.

That was what he was.

What in the world did someone like him dream of?

*"What manner of unfulfillable dreams has such a hideous monster seen?"*

Who was it that said that?

*"You should know this already. The blood-stained hands of a monster like you... They can't grasp anything... No matter where you reach, they'll never be able to attain anything."*

Right.

It was Lucile.

Ferris's brother, Lucile Eris, said that...

And, he looked at his hands.

The hands dyed with blood that Lucile had spoken of.

But whose blood was it?

*Who—who the hell have I...?*

Within the darkness.



Steadily, a red spread across.

He turned towards the center of that red.

And...

"... Ah—!?"

## Chapter 4: But that was an illusion

"... Ah—!?"

Ryner Lute couldn't help but let a voice slip out as he jumped to his feet.

"Uah... ah... w-what was...?"

However, he immediately realized that what he saw was a dream.

Looking around, he was in an inn room that one couldn't say was of very high quality.

Only the rigid bed on which his tall and lean figure was resting, a table, and a small dresser were in the room.

Similarly, there were sorry excuses for curtains that were unable to stop sunlight from streaming through.

Passing through those white curtains, light shone on Ryner.

Ryner frowned at the glare, speaking in a tired voice as he got up.

"... I hate white curtains."

*If they're gonna use thin cloth, they should at least pick a good colour,* he thought.

"Judging from the light, it's already noon, huh?"

For the record, it was already past noon.

Despite that, his hair was a mess. His eyes were also eternally sleepy. His entire body gave off an air of exhaustion.

Like that, he yawned loudly, before staring the light coming through the curtains again.

"... Ah, what? What's this? Is that light what woke me up? Is that how it is? Saying that it's already morning. Saying that it's time to wake up. But it's making



fun of me. I'm not the master just for show, you know. I refuse to wake up thanks to this kind of sunlight. Just watch my special move!"

Saying that, he had no idea what he was the master of and what special move, pushing off his blanket and lying down again.

And with a triumphant air,

"How do you like that!? Secret technique • Ah~, the sun feels good. With the sun shining down on me like that, I'm getting sleepy again without even tryi... haa..."

Seeing as how he was saying that by himself to the empty air, he stopped talking.

At any rate, since he was lying down again, he closed his eyes.

While it was normally easy for him to fly off to the land of sleep at any time...

He couldn't fall asleep.

*Is it because of the dream I had just now?*

*Or because of what Lucile said yesterday night?*

*Maybe it's Sion's...*

But Ryner laughed at that.

"Haha."

It was an utterly self-deprecating laugh.

And he muttered,

"That can't be."

Right.

That couldn't be it. Something like not being able to fall asleep because of Lucile and Sion's words was stupid.

He remembered Lucile's words.

Monster.

That was what Lucile said about Ryner.

*"What manner of unfulfillable dreams... has such a hideous monster seen?"*

He didn't have any such dreams.

From the beginning, he knew that he was a monster.

A despised monster that wasn't needed by anyone.

After so long, he wasn't disheartened by that.

Ryner lifted his head.

On top of the wooden table, sender unwritten, was a letter.

In it, given from Sion Astal to Luke Stokkart, were these three orders.

*First.*

*Search and collect any Heroes' Relics that the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, Ryner Lute, overlooks.*

*Two.*

*Observe the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, Ryner Lute.*

*Three.*

*Should the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, Ryner Lute, go berserk outside of Roland or show any traitorous behaviour—  
Erase him...*

*"....."*

It was to be expected, Ryner thought.

He was a monster.

It was to be expected that a monster would be killed.

He understood that.

Lucile had said it.

*"You should know this already. The blood-stained hands of a monster like you can't grasp anything..."*



But even if he hadn't said such a thing, he knew.

*"No matter where you reach, they'll never be able to attain anything."*

Such a thing...

*"You can't come into contact with anyone."*

Such a thing...

*Even if you don't say it, I know—!*

"... Geez..."

Ryner lightly pressed down on his forehead.

"And that dream on top of it all... I'm an idiot..."

He didn't have any memories from before the age of five.

After so long...

After so long, why...

"My family, huh? Haha. Somehow, that was a seriously embarrassing dream..."

Furthermore, it was his parents.

That he was loved by his parents.

A dream that he had truly been loved when he was born.

"I..."

With tired, vacant eyes and no one else around, he stared at empty space.

"... Don't tell me that that's my wish or something?"

That the dream was a mirror that reflected the beholder's desires.

However, he immediately shook his head, laughing.

"No way. By this point... I... I should know pretty well, shouldn't I? I can't be by Sion and Ferris's... no, by anyone's side..."

Even if I like them, I can't be by their side."

Because he would kill them.

Even though he didn't want to kill them, to his friends, he...

Because he would kill the people he claimed to like.

From the beginning, he should've known that very well.

Despite that.

With tired eyes, Ryner laughed.

And,

"... I really am an idiot,"

He said such a thing, to which,

"Mm-hmm. You're always an idiot. Did you only notice just now?"

For some a reason, a female voice strangely lacking in emotion replied.

It was a familiar voice.

The door was flung open. Entering was a woman of unparallel beauty.

Long, glossy blonde hair, clear white skin.

Ferris Eris.

Ferris gazed at Ryner with her typical emotionless expression, and,

"Do you intend to sleep all day? Even though there's an emergency,"

She said that kind of thing.

Ryner smiled wryly at that.

"Emergency? What? I don't like to do troublesome things in the morning, you know?"

Entering the room at her own convenience, Ferris opened the curtains, again at her own convenience.

Bright sunlight shone into the room.

"Uwa, too bright."

Ryner frowned, saying that while glaring at Ferris.

"Are you trying to kill me!?"



To that, Ferris said,

"If something of this degree could kill the notorious sex fiend Ryner Lute, the world would've become peaceful a long time ago,"

At words like those, Ryner...

In an instant, he narrowed his eyes, and,

"Ah... Well, that's right, I guess,"

He nodded.

Again, Ferris stared at Ryner.

"In any case, it happened yesterday evening. As the women and children of Roland shuddered in fear, you did this and that until late at night— isn't that right?"

To that, Ryner also—

"I guess so."

For some reason, Ferris then made a displeased face, before speaking in an emotionless voice.

"You're not denying it?"

"Huh? Do you want me to deny it?"

At that, Ferris nodded deeply with an "uh-huh".

"If you're not unhappy, then it's obviously no fun."

Instinctively,



"What am I, your toy!?"

Ryner shouted, which Ferris, for some reason, seemed to be a bit happy about.

"Correct. If it's like that, then good. All right, my first duty of the day has been accomplished."

"... What duty, geez."

Ryner spoke with an annoyed face.

"... Ah, well, whatever. So? What's the emergency that you were..."

He began, but Ferris interrupted him.

"Ah, that reminds me: it seems that yesterday evening, my brother... You met with Lucile."

Lucile...

Right.

He met with him last night.

Ryner spoke with half-closed eyes.

"... What? You said all that before even though you knew I wasn't attacking women and children last night?"

But at that, Ferris said,

"Mm-hmm. Because it happened, didn't it? Together, you and Lucile went after the women and children in Roland..."

"Wait, whaaaaaaaat!? That guy's into that kind of thing!?"

"Hmm? Didn't you see that for yourself?"

"Eh? Ah... W-Well..."

"So, what did Lucile say?"

To those words.

Ryner—

Laughed and spoke.



"Nothing. Ah, he said to take care of you."

"That's all?"

"That's all. I mean, it was just a chance meeting. Oh, and he also asked for us to accompany Sion to Estabul as his guards."

Then Ferris suddenly—

"That!"

She said, pointing at Ryner.

"That's the emergency we need to take care of right now."

Ryner tilted his head at at that.

" 'We?' Don't involve me in this. I told you, if it's in the morning, I don't..."

But Ferris promptly said,

"It's already afternoon. And what's more, we're already out of time. Like this, we'll be forced to accompany that diabolical, labour-standards-ignoring king, Sion Astal, to Estabul and worked to death."

Ryner nodded in understanding.

"Ah, so you're saying that before then, we should run away?"

"Mm-hmm. So get ready. That Sion gave us some money for our search for the Heroes' Relics. We'll head to Runa, and from there, depart for Cassla. We'll leave Roland for a bit."

"I see. Well, if we're going to Cassla, it's an isolated country. Sion wouldn't be able to do anything about it too soon... So when are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

"That soon—!? Seriously? Isn't Cassla pretty far? We need to prepare..."

He began, but was interrupted.

Ferris indifferently said,

"We're leaving tomorrow morning. The meeting place will be in front of the Wynnit dango shop."

"Are you even listening to me..."

However, as usual, he was interrupted.

"It'll be a long trip. We'll have to buy plenty of dango."

In that instant, Ryner grimaced as he spoke.

"Let me guess: I'm going to have to carry all of that dango?"

Ferris easily said,

"Enough for two people."

"Why are we buying that much dango!?"

He yelled, but as expected, he was ignored.

"With that said, go to bed early today. If by any chance you're late tomorrow morning..."

Saying that, she reached for the sword by her waist...

In that instant.

A high-pitched, metallic sound rang out. The sound came from a single swing of her sword, before it was put away in its sheath again...

The half-asleep Ryner's eyes didn't see the sword at all.

And Ferris spoke.

"If by any chance you're late, that action just now will be dealt to your neck."

To those words.

Ryner imagined the feeling of his neck flying towards the sky...

"... I-I'll do my best not to sleep in,"

He said wearily.

"Mm-hmm. Do your best. Then, I'll be going. After all, before we leave tomorrow morning, it's my duty to devote myself to eating all the dango in this country."

Saying such a thing, she quickly left the room.

To that, Ryner made an annoyed face as he stared at Ferris's back.

"... You're a really interesting person, aren't you..."

He muttered.

Apparently having heard that, Ferris looked over her shoulder.

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm? No, I mean, you're going to eat all of this country's dango in one day, aren't you?"

But Ferris spoke with a serious look.

"To defy the impossible is the true way of the dango."

How someone could say something like that as if it were so magnificent was a mystery.

Ryner laughed at that.

"Seriously... you're a really interesting person, huh? Even though there were a lot of troublesome things about it, going on a journey with you for a while was kind of fun."

To those words, Ferris tilted her head with a puzzled face, and,

"Hmm? Is that supposed to be your way of thanking me?"

Ryner nodded.

"Yeah. That's what it is."

"Then, you're saying that you'll carry all seven backpacks of dango?"

"S-Seven backpacks!? ... Y-You're gonna buy that many? For crying out loud..."

There, Ryner stared at Ferris with his usual sleepy eyes.

She was making a hopeful face that he would carry all seven.

If it were anyone else, rather than that, they'd only see an utterly emotionless face...

Ryner understood.

Right now, she was full of hope.

On top of that, over something as trivial as carrying dango.



He smiled at that.

If something like that made her happy...

Ryner let out a sigh and spoke.

"Okay, fine. I'll carry all seven."

In that instant.

"Oh—!?"

Ferris's expressionless face glowed even further with happiness.

"You must be growing to understand the way of the dango! Then I had best prepare fourteen packs without delay..."

To such words.

"You're buying more!?"

He said, but Ryner's retorts...

Cut through empty air.

Ferris had already dashed out of the room.

Ryner was alone in the room once more.

With the open door.

With the open curtains as well.

With it being as bright as it was, he wouldn't be able to fall asleep.

Ryner smiled wryly at that.

And then.

"....."

Without words, he quietly began to mutter within himself.



The following morning.

Ferris stood in front of the Wynnit dango shop.

At her feet were fourteen large backpacks' worth of dango.

She looked once down at her feet, and then again stared in the direction of the inn Ryner was staying at.

As it was still morning, there weren't many people on the main street.

Ferris had already been waiting for twenty minutes.

In the beginning, she'd been chatting with the dango shopkeeper, so she hadn't particularly noticed, but when the shopkeeper returned to do the morning duties, she immediately became aware of how much time had passed.

Staring down the street, Ferris narrowed her eyes.

"Another five minutes. I'll only wait another five minutes."

However, five minutes quickly passed.

Even though she'd sworn to cut off his head if he overslept.

Ferris began to run.

Towards Ryner's inn.

It was considerably far from the Wynnit dango shop to Ryner's inn. Perhaps they missed each other on the way.

If that was the case, then she would forgive him. That was what she thought. As punishment, she would make him carry eight backpacks.

Then she would forgive him.

If they missed each other on the way...

But Ferris easily made it to Ryner's inn.

The room where Ryner was staying was on the second floor.

Ferris climbed the staircase and flung open the door to his room.

"Ryner! Do you intend to sleep all day?"

She said that.

However, those words...

Cut through empty air.

Ryner wasn't on top of his bed. The clothes he'd roughly thrown off yesterday also weren't there.

His luggage, nothing—nothing was there.

Even though it was still morning, his bed had been neatly made.

Staring at that,

"... Hmm,"

Ferris let a murmur slip.



Somewhere, a mountain of paperwork had built up.

Staring at that,

"No, this is... Even I think this is too much work..."

Sion Astal said in an amazed voice.

Silver hair that gave off a noble air.

A symmetrical appearance.

Strong-willed golden eyes that were currently tired from a lack of sleep...

Nevertheless, those eyes didn't lose the strong light that lurked within them.

He was still young at age nineteen, and yet he'd already acceded to the throne of the Roland Empire...

To the surprise of his subordinates and even to the surprise of himself, he was a work demon.

The compact office that didn't look as if it belonged to the king was full of paperwork.

However, if it wasn't taken care of, this situation would never end.

The current situation of the country wasn't too good.

There was unrest in the neighbouring Runa Empire and Imperial Nelpha.



Rising far off in the northern area, the Gastark Empire was influencing numerous countries.

In the Menoris continent, the winds of war were about to blow.

Before they were swallowed up in this war, one way or another, Roland had to raise themselves to be the equal of other great powers and the like and not be seen as an inferior challenge...

For that, it was necessary to pacify the integrated military and nobles of the Kingdom of Estabul.

Even if he left Claugh to deal with the military affairs, Sion had to go to Estabul himself to resolve the problem with the nobles.

For that, he'd begun to make preparations, but...

Sion stared at the paperwork, clutching his head.

"If I leave the country, then whom am I going to entrust all this to during that time? ... That's the problem here."

As it hadn't been long since Sion took the throne, there weren't many people whom he could trust to leave this behind to.

Though he was the illegitimate son of the previous tyrant, he'd quickly risen to the top brass as a hero for his achievements in the war against the Kingdom of Estabul.

And then he'd started a revolution, ascending the throne.

However, during the revolution, most of the ones leading it were the commoners. Regarding this country, where nobles monopolized the important posts, the position of Sion, who'd only just taken the throne, wasn't very firm.

As the ones holding the important posts were the nobles, they wouldn't listen to what Sion said. Rather, it seemed that they were ready to stage a revolt at any moment.

There.

Sion remembered.

To his trusted confidant from when he was in the military, Calne Kaiwal,

*"All right, Calne. From now on, you're in charge of domestic affairs!"*

When he'd said that,

*"Ehhhhhh!? S-Sion-san, you're leaving me the duty of dealing with those irritating nobles!?"*

While exclaiming that, he made a face like he was about to cry.

However, afterwards, as means of dealing with stress from his rather difficult duties, for some reason Calne began to commit adultery with the nobles' wives.

*"I-I swear, I'm serious!"*

As Calne said such things to clean up after himself, Sion became just a bit worried...

Ever since Fiole Folkal's younger sister, Eslina became Calne's assistant, it seemed that his adultery ways were calming down.

"... It really is a good thing that Eslina came along,"

Sion muttered such a thing with a troubled face.

Well, at any rate, as one of Sion's first subordinates... More than that, even as someone with authority within the military, he was being worked to death with domestic affairs.

Right now, there truly was no one left whom Sion could rely on while he was absent.

No, it wasn't that he didn't have a capable person whom he could trust the most with this, but, "... I suppose I can't pull Miller away..."

Sion's headache grew increasingly worse.

It wasn't that Froaude wasn't an option either... but without Sion around, he was liable to slaughter all of the opposing nobles.

"I can't let him run around too freely..."

In the end, it came down to,

"Calne?"

But Sion frowned at that.

On top of his current duties, he would also be responsible for the duties of the king's representative, to which again, *"I swear, I'm serious!"*

Troubled, he remembered those words.

At any rate, Sion was doing his best to decrease the amount of work that the person would have to inherit.

The work was being done with unbelievable force.

But why was it that the work kept on increasing no matter how much he did?

"....."

He gazed at the mountain of paperwork that surrounded him, before letting out a sigh.

Over there.

Outside the door, there was someone's presence.

Furthermore, it was also the presence of new work.

Only those few had received Sion's approval to open the doors to his office.

For a moment, Sion closed his tired eyes, before opening them.

At that time, strong light again dwelled within his eyes.

He put on a smiling face.

If it was a duty entrusted to him, then no matter what problems he had to break through, he would smile with confidence to fool the other party.

He raised his head from the paperwork.

*What is it?*

Just as he was about to ask that...

*Zzzban—!*

A strange sound rang out.

Furthermore, the door was sliced cleanly into two, as the left half and right half fell to the ground.

It was an incredulous sight.

This was Roland's royal castle. Needless to say, the security was very tight. On top of that, here in this country, perhaps there was nowhere that was safer than where Sion was? One could say that it was that strict.

On that note, there was no reason for someone to suddenly slice apart the door in two in haste like that.

Unless...

With a slightly astounded face, Sion spoke.

"Yes, welcome. It's been a while. Could I ask why, even though we're reuniting for the first time in a while, you felt the need to slice apart the door?"

He said. As he thought, a woman of peerless beauty stood before the broken door.

In response, with an eternally emotionless face, that woman of beauty spoke.

"Because I'm angry."

Somehow, she did seem angry...

Sion made a troubled face.

"Because you're angry, you cut down the door?"

To that, Ferris nodded honestly. And then, entering the room, she looked around, even peering into the neighbouring bedroom.

"... Not here either?"

She said quietly.

Sion tilted his head at at.

"... Ah, um... just what exactly are you talking about? I would prefer it if you could explain the situation."

Ferris looked at Sion.

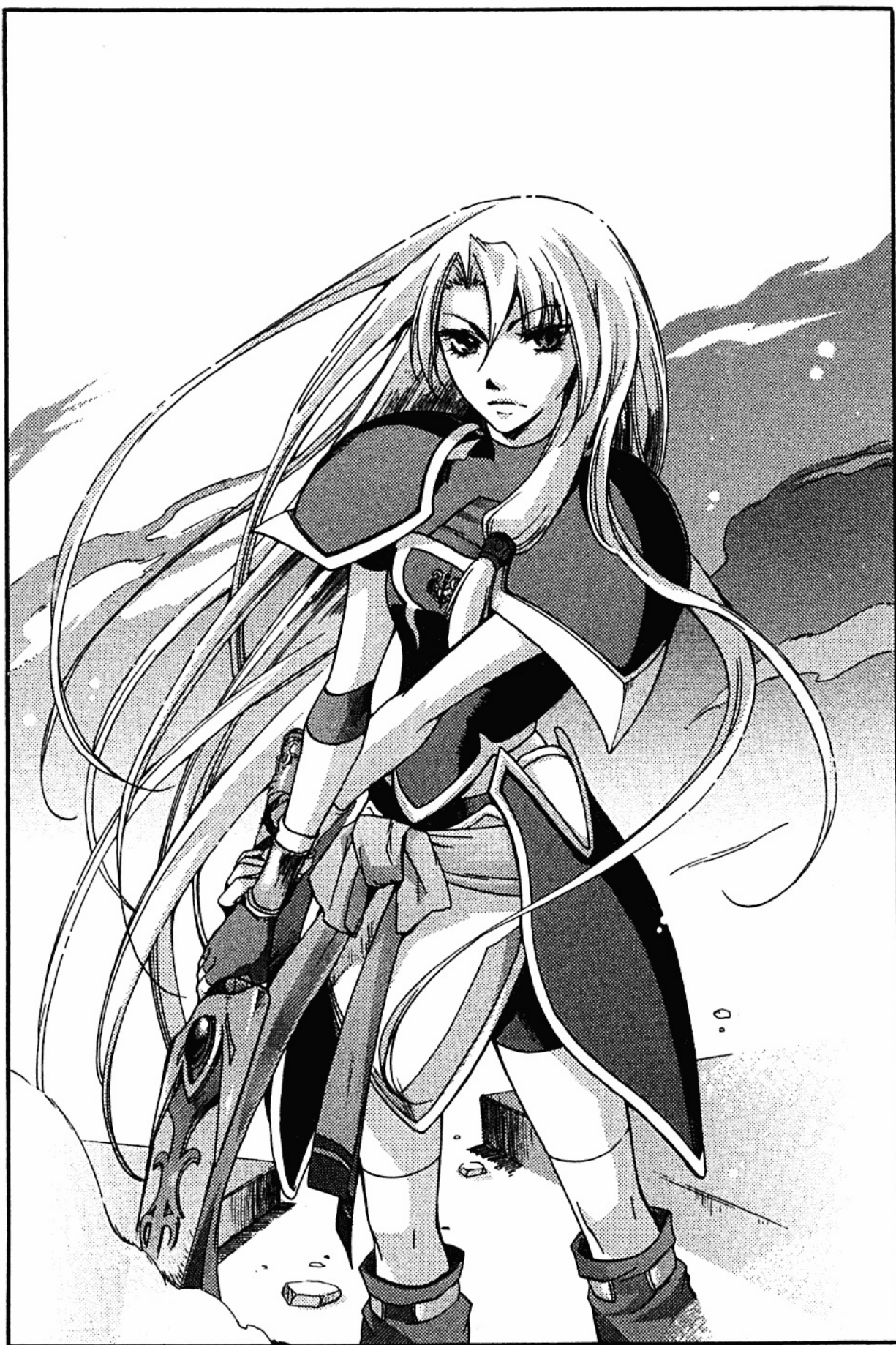
And then,

"Ryner has disappeared."

She said that.



To that,



"... Disappeared?"

Sion stared back, before looking up at the ceiling.

Like that, he thought over what Ferris just said, before looking at her again.

"... What do you mean?"

However, to that as well, Ferris simply replied,

"It's just as I said. He's not at his inn."

But Sion, not fully understanding, said,

"No, just because he isn't at his inn doesn't mean he's disappea..."

But Ferris cut Sion's words off and continued.

"This morning, he wasn't at the agreed meeting place. Even though I would remove his head if he overslept. So I went to his inn to remove his head. However, Ryner wasn't there."

As she said that, Ferris's voice seemed a bit more annoyed than usual.

He could tell that it was slightly different from the voice she used when she was making fun of Sion or playing around.

In her voice, though not easily heard, some emotion leaked out.

And.

*Ryner has...*

*Disappeared...?*

In that moment.

For some reason, it felt like everything in front of him went pitch black. His breathing became rough. *Why?*

He asked himself that. He didn't know.

*What in the world?*

*What in the world is...*

Then, over there.

"Hey,"

Ferris said.

"Eh?"

Sion lifted his head.

Then, just as suddenly, his rough breathing incredulously disappeared.

"What's wrong?"

Ferris spoke in a puzzled tone; however, he honestly didn't know.

In an instant, everything was incredulous.

In an instant, everything went back to as it was before.

Immediately, his thoughts began to whirl around.

Sion was surprised at himself.

"Ah... I'm fine. It's nothing. It's just... from a lack of sleep. More importantly, what was the inn room like?"

"... It'd been neatly arranged."

"The bed as well?"

Ferris nodded.

Sion made a contemplative face, and,

"In other words, Ryner left his room yesterday. He wouldn't do something like clean up his room, right?"

"Mm-hmm. According to the landlord, Ryner cancelled his contract with them yesterday."

"So it was the landlord who cleaned the room..."

Sion said, folding his arms.

"But what's going on?"

"....."

Ferris's face was blank.



As expected, her thoughts were unreadable. However, he knew that she was impatient.

Sion continued.

"You and Ryner were appointed as my guards for my trip to Estabul, correct? However, he didn't want to, and so decided to run away?"

However, Ferris shook her head.

"We didn't want to go through the trouble of following your orders, so Ryner and I had agreed to leave the country this morning."

At that, Sion's expression was astounded once again.

"Your destination?"

"Cassla. To search for the relics. With money from you under that pretext, we were going to buy dango from all around the world."

Sion's expression became increasingly surprised at that, as he let out a sigh.

"The two of you, going on a dango tour? You really have a good relationship with each other,"

He said.

However,

"....."

Ferris, still with an expressionless face, said nothing.

Regarding that, Sion inwardly clicked his tongue.

That was the wrong thing to say just now.

Ignoring the arrangement he'd made with Ferris, Ryner had disappeared.

What she was thinking about all of this, he couldn't tell for sure...

Did she feel hurt?

He examined her expression just a bit. But, as expected, he couldn't read her emotionless face.

Then,

"Yesterday, when we spoke, Ryner... seemed a bit strange,"

Ferris suddenly said.

Sion raised his eyebrows at that.

"Strange? How so?"

"As means of thanking me, he said he'd carry seven backpacks of dango..."

"D-Dango? Backpacks? Just what exactly..."

But Ferris interrupted.

"In any case, he was being strange!"

She said firmly.

In response, Sion stared at Ferris for a while.

"Hmm. If it's you, Ferris... then I believe you. Was there anything else that had changed? Something that was different from usual..."

At the question, Ferris closed her eyes for a moment, as if remembering, and then,

"It seems that with Brother... that he'd met with Lucile."

Sion immediately looked up at the ceiling, and,

"Lucile! What did you do?"

"....."

There was no reply.

But he was there. He should be. Even if his figure couldn't be seen, as long as Sion was within the boundaries of Roland, then Lucile was constantly watching over him.

He should be that sort of person.

"You're here, aren't you?"

He asked again.

"....."

Nevertheless, there was no reply. Regarding that, there was no indication of a

response.

*No, just maybe, he isn't here?*

Sion couldn't tell.

Looking at Ferris with a troubled expression,

"Do you know if he's here?"

He said, but Ferris shook her head.

"I can't tell with Brother."

"Is that so..."

Sion said, sighing, before he continued.

"In that case... did Ryner say what Lucile spoke to him about?"

"No... only that they met. And apparently that Lucile asked for us to be your guards."

"My guards?"

*Lucile isn't the type to say something like that, he thought...*

Ryner was missing, and if Lucile wasn't saying anything, then they had no clues whatsoever to go off of.

Anyhow, thinking over the information that he did know,

"Ryner has... disappeared on his own will."

It'd turned out like that.

Thinking over this further, Sion narrowed his eyes.

*But why now?*

Sion couldn't tell what Ryner was thinking.

As they'd been together since their academy days, there was no reason. Furthermore, he'd investigated his past.

According to the descriptions the training facility professors had written about him from the moment he'd entered...

*Ryner Lute is utterly despicable towards himself.*

A monster that hurt others.

A monster whose existence couldn't be allowed and was needed by no one.

He'd deny himself the right to cry.

But that was in the past.

Sion had wanted him.

From the very beginning, he'd wanted Ryner's power.

For the sake of bringing down the king and nobles.

Even if it was a monster's power that couldn't be controlled, he felt that it was needed.

Furthermore, Sion had felt that that wasn't the only thing to Ryner's existence.

Sion liked the way that Ryner thought.

Changing the country, changing the world—his overly naive way of thinking.

So that nobody's hands would be stained with blood.

Even so, nothing could change.

He understood that.

So that nobody—nobody has to kill anyone.

But even so, nothing could be saved.

He understood that.

However, even so, Ryner's thoughts were fascinating.

The sky Ryner looked at was different from the sky that Sion did.

But even if that was the case...

Despite that, Sion had wanted Ryner.

In that case, there should've been meaning to his existence.



No, Ferris and Kiefer as well.

Ryner had no reason to disappear anymore.

*So that he wouldn't leave, I...*

*I...*

"....."

Then, his thoughts were interrupted.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!"

Outside the room, a voice rang out. It was a familiar voice. A messenger... It was the voice of a young blond-haired man by the name of Robert.

Sion turned his attention towards him.

At the entrance of the room.

However, as Ferris had cut the door apart, he could see Robert's figure.

Robert made a surprised face at the lack of a door, and then stood at attention to Sion, furthermore staring at Ferris.

"Uwah, she's quite the beauty. A-As expected of Your Majesty... P-Pardon my rudeness..."

He said, to which, in order to correct the misunderstanding, Sion hurriedly—

"It's not what it looks like. It's not like that with her. More importantly, what's the report?"

To those words, Robert again stood at attention.

"Understood! The report is from Field Marshal Claugh Klom from the Estabul territory."

"Hmm? From Claugh? Hand it over."

"Understood."

Saying that, Robert entered the room. As he snuck a glance at Ferris and for some reason turned red, he handed the report over to Sion, before again leaving the room.

"Then, I will be going. If you require me, please call for me."

Sion nodded at that

"Understood. You may leave."

Robert simply left the room.

At that, Ferris spoke.

"You're rather commanding, aren't you, Sion?"

Sion smiled wryly at those words.

"Is that so? Well, for the time being, I *am* king. Moving on, anyhow, I'll send out a search party for Ryner. I'll command..."

While saying that, he also opened Clough's report. While getting a bad feeling.

From the very start, Clough was the sort of man who found writing reports to be troublesome. Even if a problem occurred, as long as it was a small problem, he wouldn't bother with a report.

Despite that, he'd sent a letter.

That meant that whatever problem had occurred wasn't a small matter.

On top of Ryner's disappearance, there was a letter from Clough.

*Honestly, it's one problem after another*, he wanted to complain.

However, within the report were soft, careful letters.

It wasn't Clough's clumsy handwriting. This kind of cute handwriting was evidently a woman's.

Sion was somewhat relieved at that. Though it was sent in Clough's name, perhaps this was the handwriting of Estabul's former princess who'd gone with Clough, Noa Ehn.

If it were Noa, then it wasn't strange that she'd be sending frequent reports.

In that case, perhaps it wasn't really a problem that'd occurred...

"....."

That was what he thought, but as he read the letter, he grimaced.

Ferris, at that—

"Is there a problem?"

While frowning,

"... In Estabul, an **Alpha Stigma** bearer has appeared..."

He said, groaning.

In response,

"Let me see,"

Ferris said, snatching the letter away from Sion as she began to read.

This was a summary of its contents.

An **Alpha Stigma** bearer monster was acting violently in Estabul.

Furthermore, it'd awakened.

Clough had gone to exterminate the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, and if he were able to do so, he should be able to gain a hold over Estabul's military—things like that.

Estabul's remaining soldiers were currently under the command of a man named Bayuuz White, and other such details were written.

At any rate.

It seemed that Clough had gone after the **Alpha Stigma** bearer.

Once she was finished reading the letter, Ferris spoke.

"Don't tell me that Ryner is..."

However, Sion rejected that.

"That can't be it. This letter was delivered from Estabul. Ryner went missing this morning. The times don't match."

"But here, it talks about an 'awakening'... The **Alpha Stigma** bearer in Estabul right now seems to be different from an ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearer, don't you think? And if it's a different type of **Alpha Stigma** bearer..."

Sion interrupted Ferris's words there.

"Hold on for a moment. I don't know what this 'awakening' part means. There are different types of **Alpha Stigma**?"

"....."

Ferris became silent again at that. Once more, she was silent as she appeared to be thinking over something, before, "... At the very least, Ryner's eyes are different from normal."

Sion nodded.

That had been written in the investigations Sion did on his history.

Ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearers couldn't return to normal after going berserk.

But Ryner came back.

That was why the Roland army had kept Ryner as a research subject.

Sion had personally seen Ryner go berserk once.

Before Ryner's power, the Estabul Magic Knights had been annihilated in instant.

That power had deviated from normal.

The strongest force in each nation, given the name of Magic Knight, had been nothing more than toys to be played with and destroyed before Ryner's power.

With power that no one could hope to resist, a demon king that dealt out despair.

That was what had been reflected in Sion's eyes.

An ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearer would likely be completely different.

An ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearer, even after going berserk, would only be able to kill about one unit.

And after going berserk, they wouldn't be able to return to normal.

But none of that applied to Ryner.

Nevertheless, as several accidents had piled up, then perhaps...



What was the "awakening" part in Claugh's letter?

If this **Alpha Stigma** held the same power as Ryner that time he went berserk...

Then Claugh could be killed instead.

No, if the **Alpha Stigma** bearer was the same type as Ryner, then he couldn't allow for them to be killed by Claugh.

It could lead to a clue about Ryner's **Alpha Stigma**...

"Honestly, where has Ryner gone to now of all times?"

Sion said, grumbling.

"Immediately for Ryner..."

He shook his head, standing up.

"Ferris. I'll be going to Estabul straightaway. I can't allow Claugh or the **Alpha Stigma** bearer to die. I'll leave commanding Ryner's search party to you. As soon as you find him, bring him to Estabul."

"Mmm."

Ferris nodded.

But after confirming that, Sion moved to leave. As he was about to exit the room, he said in a loud voice, "Robert!"

Then,

"Yes!"

A reply came back immediately. Confirming that, Sion spoke.

"Call for Calne and Eslina!"

"Understood!"

And then Robert ran off.

However, as soon as Sion said that, he regretted it slightly.

It seemed that one way or another, as Ferris had been assigned to commanding the search party for Ryner, that the one who'd take care of things

in Sion's absence would have to be Calne.

*If Calne's old habits start acting up again, he'll be scolded by Eslina...*

While thinking such things, Sion immediately began preparing to go to Estabul...



Incidentally.

Unrelated to Sion's worries, as soon as Ferris, Calne, and Eslina met, they had this exchange.

"In other words, from now on, I am the almighty ruler of you two."

"Uwa!? What a beauty! I have no problems with working with a beauty like this, Sion-san. Hurray. I love you, Sion-san!"

"Ehh—!? Ah... wha... that may be true... b-but... r-right now, I really hate you, Calne-san!"

"....."

Sion clutched his head.

# Chapter 5: An illusion that I couldn't reach no matter how hard I wished

The village where the **Alpha Stigma** bearer appeared.

It was a small village by the name of Belt in the eastern region of Estabul.

Claugh Klom was a small distance away from that village, leading an army.

Red hair like fire, sharp eyes. A tight, steel-like body that wore the Roland uniform.

He was called by many names.

The Field Marshal of the Roland Empire.

Or the demon of the battlefield, Crimson Fingered Clough.

Nowdays, if he were to give the orders, a hundred thousand troops would move.

But the army he led right now was strangely mixed with uniforms of two different colours.

Those who wore Roland's uniform were a few hundred in number.

And to the side, those dressed in Estabul's uniform, brought along by Bayuuz and said to be the elite, were a hundred in number.

Looking at that, Clough shrugged, and,

"Like this, a fight could break out between Roland and Estabul at any moment,"

He muttered to himself.

With the rivalry between the two armies burning clearly, despite the fact they had to act together as one, their framework was essentially broken.

*On top of that...*

Thinking that, Claugh looked to the man standing by his side, who'd gathered the remaining Estabul soldiers—Bayuuz White.

Apparently the same age as Claugh at around twenty-five. Woven light brown hair. Light brown eyes. Creased brow. His mouth crooked in sarcasm... and with a repulsed expression, "Is that what you want? I don't mind at any time. With someone with an empty brain like you leading the Roland army, we'll crush you in an instant,"

He said such a thing.

In response, the subordinate following behind Claugh, Shuss Shirazz, made a grim expression.

Blond hair gathered at the back, pale green eyes. He wasn't particularly tall. He was still young at age eighteen.

However, in spite of his young age, he'd supported Claugh in nearly all of his battles and alone was his long-time trusted confidant. Always composed, he would gather information and analyze the battle situation. But if he had one flaw, it was that he was a little too serious...

He glared directly at Bayuuz.

"... I've been patient up until now on Field Marshal Claugh's orders, but if that was an insult towards the Field Marshal, who's of higher ranking..."

A smile arose in Bayuuz's face.

"If it was, what are you going to do about it?"

"I won't allow it."

As Shuss said that, Claugh made a troubled face.

"Hey, hey, Shuss. Don't mind him. He's just tired."

He interjected; however, Bayuuz continued.

"Hoh? Will you hit me? If superior officers are superior officers, then subordinates are subordinates as well. To go against orders based on your emotions... A fool has better training than that."

"You bastard...!?"

He began, but Bayuuz smiled further, and,

"So try and hit me. At any rate, all of you from Roland are incompetent compared to us from Estabul. Because you're losing the argument, you'd immediately resort to violence?"

"You're further insulting..."

But again Bayuuz continued.

"Furthermore, a failure of a Field Marshal with no ability, coming here to Estabul, will only be a hindrance..."

Then, Shuss snapped. To Bayuuz—

"You bastard—! Estabul's social standing..."

In that instant.

Clough punched Shuss's face.

With a loud, dull sound, Shuss was blown off.

What Shuss was going to say.

*"Estabul's social standing..."*

That was the worst thing that could be said.

Here in this place, those words were indisputably words that shouldn't be said.

No, in Roland, it was what everyone was thinking.





And conversely, what Estabul thought.

*"Roland's social standing..."*

Thus, they were words that weren't to leave one's mouth by any means.

Up until now, with Estabul being taken in by Roland, the two had a long history of constant war, and so problems still lingered.

The problem was that it didn't seem like they could ever be on good terms with one another.

Honestly, it wouldn't be strange if they started killing each other at any moment.

Despite that, Shuss's words.

*"Estabul's social standing..."*

If that were to be declared, a fight would break out immediately.

It would be a critical situation.

Before that could happen, Claugh punched Shuss to stop him.

However, with that, the gazes of both the Roland and Estabul armies were upon him.

"... Geez,"

Claugh groaned quietly.

But against his will, there was some amusement in his voice as well.

He looked to the side. Bayuuz had already noticed what was going on. He had a disappointed expression. And then, he looked at Shuss, who'd fallen to the ground.

Shuss had blood streaming from his mouth; however, a smile arose in his face.

In response, a smile was brought forth against Claugh's will again, as he shouted.

"Shuss! If you dare insult Estabul again, you'll be punished!"

Shuss, in a pitiable voice, said,

"H-However..."

"Be quiet!"

Claugh yelled, kicking Shuss.

Even though he hadn't put much power behind it, Shuss was sent flying in a showy manner... before grovelling on the ground.

"... Ah, guh... uu... M-My apologies, Your Excellency, Field Marshal Clough Klom..."

Regarding that scene, everyone was silent for a moment, before noise broke out.

And all of it went according to Shuss's plan.

They would allow Bayuuz to make a fool out of Roland, but Shuss, for saying even one ill thing of Estabul, was hit repeatedly.

That was what everyone saw.

The truth was, Bayuuz had, for the sake of testing to see whether Roland was worthy of his faith, purposely provoked them... However, though he was only using Shuss...

The soldiers saw Clough seriously show respect to the Estabul soldiers, and treated the Roland soldiers equally.

After a while, the silence returned.

Then, as nothing at all was said, a controlled atmosphere fell over the soldiers.

Regarding that, Bayuuz frowned and muttered,

"... Huh. Your subordinate is the same as you—a detestable fellow."

Claugh laughed.

"I'll take that as a compliment?"

Bayuuz then made an increasingly annoyed face... Already, it seemed that he was running out of things to say, before, "... I would rather die than do anything

that makes you happy,"

He said in an agonized voice.

Somehow, it seemed like that was a compliment.

And so, Claugh also—

"Well, thanks you to going along with Shuss's plan despite having figured it out halfway through, we've united the soldiers."

Bayuuz immediately nodded.

"Of course. It was all thanks to me."

"All of it!?"

Bayuuz interrupted his retort.

"... Mm-hmm. Well, if it weren't for my provocation, I wouldn't have been able to evaluate Shuss's abilities. It seems that Roland is also fairly capable. I acknowledge that."

"Oh, then, will you work together with Roland..."

He began, but as expected, he was easily cut off again.

"However, Claugh Klom. You're the exception—good for absolutely nothing! I said it plainly: you're a hindrance. A complete hindrance!"

"A complete hindrance, am I... even though I was putting on a pretty good act, hitting Shuss right up until the end..."

"Regardless of whether you hit your subordinate or not, you're the cancer that, for Roland and Estabul's relationship, deceived our goddess, Princess Noa. Hurry up and disappear."

"....."

In response, Claugh clutched his head.

In the end, it seemed that Bayuuz refused to get along with someone on good terms with Noa.

*This is gonna be a problem if I'm to unify Estabul, huh...* Claugh started to think about such things.

If it were only Claugh whom Bayuuz refused to talk properly with, then with someone like Calne, truth be told, wouldn't talks have gone a lot more smoothly?

"Honestly..."

Claugh's expression tightened. He looked towards the village, and then saw it just a bit up ahead.

And he murmured,

"This isn't the time to be saying that, huh?"

In the village skies, an ominous amount of birds were flying around.

Claugh had seen that sight many times before.

It was a sight that had appeared in many battlefields.

The sky was filled with birds.

And below, without exception... there were numerous corpses.

Then, Bayuuz spoke.

"As our intelligence said, the village has been completely slaughtered."

Claugh looked at Bayuuz.

"Is it really an **Alpha Stigma** bearer?"

"According to those who survived the encounter, he has black hair, black clothing, and black eyes with a vermillion pattern glowing in the center."

A vermillion pattern within the eyes.

That was the mark of the cursed.

Of the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, despised by everyone as taboo.

Not only that, but this **Alpha Stigma** bearer...

Devoured people.

It seemed that he'd killed and devoured everyone in Belt village...

Claugh spoke.

"Then, the monster is still in the village?"



"Who knows? However, he devours people. Like an animal, he might've come to a stop. Or he might've gone to another village for his next prey."

Next prey.

To suppress the **Alpha Stigma** bearer was the military's order.

If it were an ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearer, one unit would be enough to kill him.

However.

Regarding this monster, it seemed he wasn't afraid of the likes of a force come to deal with him.

Staring in the direction of the village, Claugh stroked his right arm.

His right arm with a red tattoo emblazoned on it. Without that tattoo, Claugh's right arm wouldn't be able to move, due to an injury.

An injury attained when it'd been devoured and torn apart by an **Alpha Stigma** bearer.

At that time, Claugh had only been able to cry out.

Trembling in fear, crying out in grief, and only able to flee.

However, now...

Bayuuz asked,

"Now then. What are we going to do? The other party is awakening... Shall we bear witness to your power, oh Field Marshal of Roland?"

In response, staring in the direction of the village, a smile spread across Claugh's face.

"... Reduce the village to ashes. Shuss. Prepare the military formation. We'll kill this monster."

However, that smile was tightened by the feeling inside of him.

Echoing in his mind were *his* words.

And a laughing voice.

*"Ah... your thin arm... Somehow, it seems rather delicious?"*

The sound of his arm being devoured and torn apart.

His clumsy scream.

As if to erase that voice, Claugh muttered.

"... I'll kill him."

That **Alpha Stigma** monster...

He'd kill that monster.

Like that, he glared sharply at the village.



They set the village on fire.

The birds that had flocked towards the corpses flew away.

The village was in horrible condition. Devoured corpses were scattered everywhere.

Women, children—they'd been killed indiscriminately.

By all rights, Bayuuz had wanted to send out scouts before they set the village on fire to check for survivors...

However, after seeing the village's condition, he'd stopped.

In this situation, it was clear there were no survivors.

It wasn't a large village.

If it was that monster, it was evident that every last person had been killed.

In that case, there was no need to declare their intentions.

Their strategy was simple.

Set the village on fire.

Separate from the main body of the army with Claugh, ten troops of eight men surrounded the village.

Each troop was waiting for the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, driven out of the fire, to

appear, while seven from each invoked large-scale offensive magic.

Furthermore, the remaining person was to send the battle signal to the other troops.

However, they were not to give too far of a chase.

Once the large-scale magic was fired, they were to evacuate immediately.

In that instant, if they could confine him, a hundred soldiers would be able to chase the monster.

Honestly, it wasn't a very sophisticated strategy—it was a simple one.

But even so, it should be their victory.

No matter how strong that monster may be, they could match it with military might.

Over here were a hundred soldiers. Unperturbed about the situation, the hundred of them were elites who'd served in the military for a long time.

Against an opponent of only one person, it was overkill to use so much power.

*We'll win.*

He thought that.

On top of that, Claugh didn't intend to sacrifice a single person.

This time would be different.

"....."

The village was burning.

The fire was rapidly becoming stronger.

Claugh was prepared to move at any moment. Where Claugh was right now were twenty people.

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't come out this way.

Perhaps, with a small number of people, he would try to kill the eight-men squads and escape.

Chasing them from behind... they'd kill him.

No, or maybe, if this monster held a large amount of self-confidence, he would come this way?

In any case, it was almost time. If he was in this village...

There, next to him, Bayuuz spoke.

"... He's not coming out. As I thought, he's already left the village..."

He began, but then his words stopped.

Appearing from within the fire was a black silhouette.

Walking in a composed manner, a single young man was exiting the village.

Black hair, black clothing... He was dressed in a tidy, tight jet black suit that heavily resembled the garb of the clergyman of the religious Runa Empire; however, his skin was an ominous white.

It truly was exactly the same figure in Claugh's memories.

A figure in around his mid-twenties who hadn't changed at all.

He hadn't aged a bit.

It was the exact same figure as from back then.

It was him.

The man smiled. Apparently cheerful over something, he looked in the direction of Claugh and co. and smiled.

Just as he thought, it was him.

From his smiling mouth, blood dripped.

And in his flexible hand was a half-eaten person's...

Over there, from his subordinates, came screams and yells.

Shuss and Bayuuz also made disgusted noises.

However, a smile arose in Claugh's face.

*Finally...*

"Don't lose your head! Maintain your battle formation! Prepare to fire large-scale magic—!"

*Finally, I'll kill you.*

Immediately after he gave the order, from behind Claugh, bright light began to form.

It was magic ordinarily used in war. The casting time suffered, but more or less, its damaging capabilities were abnormal.

If it were to be used, everything would be blown away without a trace, and the surrounding terrain would be altered.

Even while looking at that light, the man approached in a composed manner. As usual, his mouth was in the shape of a calm smile But,

"I'll wipe that calm smile off your face right now,"

The magic was completed.

Regarding that.

"Kill him—!"

And the magic fired.

It hit the man.

In that instant...

The magic disappeared.

"Wha..."

In that moment, Claugh didn't understand what had happened.

But the man was still smiling. After tossing away the half-eaten person's remains, he began running towards them, smiling like that, and then jumped.

It was unbelievable jumping power.

Lightly passing over Claugh's head, he descended into the center of the soldiers behind him...

A strange sound rang out.

Claugh immediately whirled around. There, the man was holding the heads of



two of Claugh's subordinates...

Those soldier's necks were bent at an impossible angle...

He tore them off.

And again, he smiled.

"Fufu... Humans are always so fragile, aren't they?"

His voice.

That voice.

Blood spouted into the air.

In the moment that it happened, Claugh and everyone else couldn't move for a while.

From within, the man's laughing voice continued to resound.

"Fu, fufufu... Ahaha..."

The man moved to reach out with his hands again.

Claugh, at that,

"Center formation! Deal with him!"

Again yelled.

But there was no reaction.

Another head went flying. And the man reached out again...

However, it only went that far.

The soldiers finally began to move.

The soldiers here didn't lose their cool after seeing their allies' heads fly.

That sort of people were gathered here. After all, their opponent was only one person.

Regardless of his strange movements, he wasn't that great of an enemy.

Surrounding the man, the soldiers began to chant their spells...

Claugh started to run as well.

From behind,

"Back him up. We'll kill that guy,"

Bayuuz said, as he began to draw letter of light in the air.

His invocation was, more so than the magic circles that Roland's soldiers were drawing, more so than the Estabul soldier's letters of light... It was significantly faster.

At that,

"Huh. How dependable, huh?"

After clicking his tongue, Claugh smiled wryly.

By that point, the man had already noticed him.

"How fast. Fu, fufufufufu. Good. I love meat with some spirit..."

He began, but his words stopped. And he made an *oh* sort of face.

Looking at Claugh's face...

"It's you."

And his increasingly cheerful laughter spread out.

"... Ahh. You've seem to grown to be rather delicious."

To those words.

*Perfect.*

Claugh thought that.

This bastard...

"You remember me, huh!? Then, as you regret not killing me back then, die!"

The right arm that the man had once devoured and torn to shreds. Claugh swung that arm.

Then, the many red magic formations inscribed on his arm began to glow.

This opportunity was Claugh's alone.

*I'll kill him.*

*There's no way he can dodge this.*

On top of that.

Apparently sensing a strange power from Claugh's arm, the man made a move to escape backwards, but, "I won't let you escape!"

Shuss threw a knife.

"Oh—"

The man easily avoided it. But because of that, his movements stopped for an instant.

Claugh had further shortened the distance.

By that point, Claugh was already reaching out towards the man. The air surrounding Claugh's arm became a sharp whirlpool.

Anything that whirlpool touched would be ripped apart.

And because of Claugh's hand that would be dyed in his enemy's blood, he was called this.

Crimson Fingered Claugh Klom.

The man made a slightly surprised face. And again, he jumped backwards to escape. That movement surpassed that of a human's movements. Twisting his body at an abnormal angle, he evaded Claugh's arm. And like that, he moved to leap backwards...

But,

"I won't let you escape that way.

I OFFER THE CONTRACTED WORDS, RELEASING THE SPIRIT OF LIGHT DANCING IN THE SKY!"

As Bayuuz finished chanting, he lifted his head, as light in the shape of an undefined dog-like being took the form of a beast.

He released it in the direction that the man was moving towards.

There was nowhere he could escape anymore.

In front of him was Claugh's arm.

And behind him was Bayuuz's magic.

The man's movements stopped.

Regarding that,

"This is for my friends. Die,"

Claugh swung his arm.

The man again smiled.

"The one who's finished is you!"

The man, lowering himself into the brink of a strange stance, opened his eyes wide.

Black eyes.

And in those eyes, cut into the shape of a cross as it rose, a vermillion pattern.

A vermillion cross pattern...

That pattern glowed a bright red.

The beasts of light that Bayuuz had released were absorbed by those eyes...

"I consume power..."

In that moment, the man's movements accelerated. His movements were too quick to be followed by Claugh.

"... and unleash it!"

He felt something touch his shoulder.

But it was too fast for him to react to. By that point, the man had already moved away from Claugh.

In his hand was an arm with a red tattoo emblazoned on it. Holding up that arm...

Looking at that,

"... Ah—"

Claugh's voice wouldn't come out.

*What the hell is...*

He was looking at his own arm. However, what was once at his shoulder was completely gone...

Blood was gushing out.

"C-Claugh-san—!?"

Shuss's screaming voice.

Continuing,

"Che. Not good. This is..."

Bayuuz's concern came forth.

The other soldiers,

"C-Crimson Fingered Clough has..."

"What the hell is that guy..."

Began to cause a commotion.

The situation wasn't good.

They'd lost their commander. They'd lost the only thing keeping them coordinated.

In addition to that, the sight of Crimson Fingered Clough, whose mighty strength they boasted of, being defeated, dealt a severe blow to the soldiers' morale.

Furthermore, as if to deal the final blow, the man...

"Victory? Aren't you foolish livestock, for thinking that you could kill your predator?"

After saying that, he bit into Clough's apparently delicious arm...

With that, it was all over.

"M-Monster..."

"I-It's impossible... against that kind of monster... to win is..."





Bayuuz shouted.

"Quiet down. Deal with this calmly!"

He said, but it was already futile.

The soldiers began to scatter and flee.

The man... No, the monster that devoured humans, after devouring Claugh's arm to shreds— "Ah... Ahhh... How truly... truly glad I am that I left you alone back then! Amazing. I'm filled with power. With this, with this..."

With an intoxicated expression, he spoke.

"... With this, I could kill each and every last person here at once, with no traces left..."

The monster started to move.

However, Claugh didn't move. The damage to his shoulder was too great.

No, if Shuss weren't supporting him, he wouldn't even be able to stand.

Holding onto Claugh, Shuss moved to leave the place.

"Da... Damn it... Sh-Shuss."

However, Shuss didn't look at Claugh. While seeming determined on leaving the place,

"R-Right now, I'll treat your wounds. I'll save you, no matter what. I won't let you be killed, no matter what, Claugh-san."

But he was going to die.

He knew that already.

And Shuss would die as well.

Like this, if he were to hold onto Claugh, he likely wouldn't be able to get away.

Two people would die here.

However. If Claugh stayed behind and kept the monster here, then maybe...

During the time that the monster took to devour him, the other soldiers might

be able to get away.

That was why he couldn't run away.

"Let go... of me, Shuss."

"I'm not listening to your orders right now!"

Shuss said sharply.

Claugh's expression curved at that. This guy was that kind of person. Really far too serious, overly faithful, occasionally making the wrong judgment.

And that was why he liked him.

*I have good subordinates*, Clough thought.

*No, I have good friends.*

Even without him, surely Sion would be all right, wouldn't he? Even without him, Shuss, Miller, Luke, Calne... no, even Bayuuz was a rather good man.

He could become Field Marshal in Clough's stead.

And the soldiers here... Roland's soldiers, Estabul's soldiers... From hereon, they would be necessary to Roland.

It was necessary for as many people to escape as possible.

The monster was killing each and every person that tried to escape...

However, it was impossible to slaughter them all.

In that case...

Claugh mustered up all of his remaining strength to move his left hand. And, forcibly pushing Shuss's arm away, he fell to the ground.

At that, Shuss—

"Wha... Clough-san! What are you..."

But Clough ignored those words.

Looking towards the monster, he raised his voice.

"H-Hey, monster! My flesh is delicious, isn't it!? Don't be so unfaithful, and devour me!"

He tried to shout that, but surprisingly, his voice came out as a quiet groan. If he wasn't heard just now... He didn't have the strength remaining to shout again.

Over there, the monster looked his way.

A cheerful expression.

He stuck out his tongue...

"... Haa. He heard me? We're saved..."

Claugh let out a sigh of relief.

In response, Shuss, while trying to hold Clough again—

"Damn it..."

But Clough shook his head.

"... Hurry up and escape. I can't get away. You should know that by now, right? I didn't train you up until now to be a man who can't remember to take advantage of the situation. Escape. Those are my orders."

In response, Shuss said,

"L-Like I said, I'm not listening to your orders anymore..."

Interrupting those words, Clough spoke.

"Those are my orders. If you won't listen, you'll be no more."

In that instant.

Shuss's expression bended. With a face as if he were about to cry...

"Damn it... Damn it..."

He glared at the monster.

Claugh smiled at that face.

"... Well, give my regards to Sion... and to Noa..."

But all of a sudden, something forcibly grabbed Clough's hair and began to drag him along the ground.

"Eh? Eh!?"

Without thinking, Claugh let a stupid-sounding voice slip out.

Furthermore, just then, a disagreeable voice that he definitely didn't want to hear before he died resounded.

"Idiot. Who'd want to tell Lady Noa anything from someone as filthy as you?"

It was Bayuuz.

To that, Claugh—

"Y-You, what are you..."

However, Bayuuz said in an increasingly displeased voice,

"But even if a guy like you were to die, our kind Lady Noa would be sad. So I'll save you."

"Idiot... that would be the other guy..."

But again, Bayuuz interrupted Claugh's words.

"The idiot is you. Look at that. In order to save you, those Roland guys are facing the monster again."

"Wha..."

At that, Claugh was speechless.

"They're a bunch of damn fools..."

Bayuuz easily nodded.

"Yeah. Including you, Roland's nothing but a bunch of fools. Honestly, it makes me sick. To lose in popularity to you honestly makes me sick. It makes me sick. It makes me sick. It makes me sick."

"W-What are you..."

However, Bayuuz then stopped moving.

And,

"It makes me sick, so I'll save you,"

Raising both hands, he shouted.

"Stop, Estabul soldiers! Look! Those Roland idiots are going to die right now!"

That's why we'll do these idiots a favour and save them!"

Then,

*"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"*

They shouted all at once.

Somehow, the part about calling Roland idiots was quite effective.

Furthermore, Bayuuz continued.

"Everyone fire magic! See now, you Roland idiots too! One person, one shot! Immediately withdraw after attacking! Run away with everything you've got. If even one person dies, you'll all be executed!"

In that moment.

Letters of light and magic circles filled one's sight.

There were considerably different systems... However, they were all aimed at the same target.

At that,

"B-Bastard, are you an idiot... if we fire magic in a situation like this, we'll hit our own..."

Clagh began, but Bayuuz immediately rejected it.

"That won't happen. Somehow, it seems like that monster absorbs power... that he absorbs magic. In that case, he'll definitely absorb all of it."

Right.

He saw for himself that that monster, with eyes in which that vermillion pattern floated, absorbed the magic Bayuuz had fired...

However,

"What if he doesn't?"

But Bayuuz easily replied,

"If that's the case, then pray, you idiot. I won't stop by this point."

"S-Seriously, you!?"

He began, but was ignored.

Bayuuz looked at Shuss, and,

"Hey, Shuss, was it? Grab this idiot's legs. If he doesn't hurry up and get treatment, this idiot will die."

"Ah, y-yes..."

Saying that, Shuss lifted Claugh's legs.

"H-Hey, Shuss. Why are you listening to that guy's orders!?"

However, Shuss smiled cheerfully, and,

"One way or another, I think that Bayuuz-san is a good person... With him in charge of Estabul, I feel that we'll be able to be on good terms with one another."

He said such a thing.

At that, *who the hell's a good person*, Claugh wanted to shout...

He didn't have the strength. As he'd already lost too much blood, exhaustion started to attack him...

"Ah, damn it..."

He was only able to say that.

Above Claugh...

"Hmm. I can't believe that I would lose in popularity to a good-for-nothing Field Marshal who's exhausted all of his common courtesy. It can't be helped. If it comes down to this, taking over the Roland army, the kind words of our Lady Noa... hmm? Oh, just as calculated, that monster absorbed the magic. Like this, everyone will be able to get away."

"Ehh, you did it!"

"Mm-hmm. I did. How about it, Shuss-kun? How about you stop being this man's subordinate and become mine instead?"

For some reason, Bayuuz's tone suddenly changed.

"Eh? Ah, I'd say that more importantly, if we don't hurry, Claugh-san..."



"Well, well, we can just leave him behind. You're not too bad. You're different from that idiot Clagh; you seem considerably competent. I like a guy with talent. More than a useless, stupid blockhead who bleeds everywhere..."

While he'd been able to listen up until then, Clagh's consciousness wavered. He couldn't hear anything.

But Clagh knew that Bayuuz was continuing to insult him endlessly.

Clagh smiled wryly at that.

*If I'm treated in time and can wake up again, I'll be sure to kill Bayuuz...*

After thinking that, he forcibly opened his eyes that had closed without him knowing.

He looked ahead.

With large amounts of magic being fired, from within that vortex of light...

However, glowing brightly was a vermillion cross pattern.

And a smile that mocked Clagh, mocked the humans.

Glaring at that figure,

"... Damnit,"

After spitting that out, Clagh lost consciousness.

Nevertheless.

That monster continued to smile.



Monster.

A monster that held eyes with a cursed vermillion pattern appeared and slaughtered and devoured countless human beings...

That information made its way to the northern continent.

It was information that she'd been constantly, constantly searching for.

Even though here, such information wasn't surprising.

"After coming all this way... Going around in circles across the continent over these last two years... In the end, arriving here in the northern continent, it's common knowledge..."

Kiefer Knolles spoke with a dejected expression.

Straightforward red eyes. Red hair of the same shade.

A thin, flexible body; however, compared to two years ago, she might've gained just a bit of extra weight?

Well, either way, she'd yet to become the woman her older sister was, and speaking of recent troubles, that was also something that worried her.

Even though she'd already surpassed her sister's age back then...

Like this, when she reunited with Ryner, would he say that she wasn't very womanly and that he didn't like that?

Such things were troubling her.

"Ah, geez, if I could've been born as my sister, who had to deal with being popular with men... maybe I could've come up with a way or two to tell Ryner in my dreams..."

After saying that all by herself... She recalled her sister's pretty figure, and following that, her younger sister's cheerfully smiling face arose.

Even though the two had died many years ago, that she could still vividly remember their figures was a pride of hers.

The figures of two people whom she could never meet again...

"....."

Regarding that, Kiefer smiled sadly, but then came back to her senses.

"Now then... I have to hurry up and do my investigation."

She was in a small library.

This library was likely in the northernmost region of the continent, in a

remote area.

No, perhaps you couldn't call this place a remote area anymore...

However, no matter how you looked at it, it was a rural town.

But this town's name was,

*"The imperial capital of the Gastark Empire, Grenslade village."*

"....."

Something was obviously strange...

Even though it was the capital, it was a village... the first time she'd heard the village's name, she'd accidentally retorted that...

Apparently, this was the village where the Gastark Empire's king had been born, and as his birthplace, was a place of importance.

Well, that kind of thing wasn't important anyway.

Kiefer had come to this village's library.

Her reason for coming to this library was, of course, to save Ryner.

Because of the curse known as the **Alpha Stigma**...

For the sake of setting Ryner free.

However, up until she came to this library on the northern edge of the continent, she hadn't been able to get a hold of any clues.

Despite that...

Within Gastark territory, such information was everywhere.

Monsters that devoured people.

Monsters that brought forth destruction.

And the descendants of heroes...

They were things of fairy tales told to children.

However, suiting such fairy tales, it was a beautiful place overflowing with nature.

If she were to alter her words, it didn't seem like a very prosperous country...

It was decidedly a place that not many people inhabited.

On the northernmost edge of the Menoris continent. Surrounded by mountains, it seemed that snow was piling up because of the season.

Naturally, the population was rather small.

Even on the map, it was a small, nameless country...

No... If one was to talk about the scale, it was more of a town?

It seemed to have a long history. It was a plot of land that lacked appeal that would induce other countries to attack... or was there another reason that it'd survived this long...?

And here, recently.

Gastark suddenly began to invade other countries.

It'd already taken over all of the surrounding smaller countries at once, but then on the other hand, the strongest country in the northern continent... even the superpower Imperial Stohl, which possessed four times the might of Roland, had fallen prostrate.

"... It's impossible,"

Kiefer muttered.

However, Gastark had made it possible.

"... It's impossible... and that's why there might be info on a way to save Ryner here..."

Her guess was correct.

Things that seemed as if they came out of a fairy tale... This country was brimming with such information.

But...

"Eyes... eyes... eyes... There's nothing aside from that."

It was the keyword.

Vermillion pattern.

Going berserk.

Monsters that were seen as taboo.

And.

## The **Alpha Stigma**.

Searching for that within the texts, she read from one edge to the next.

In the library, she was seated at a wooden table that could fit four people.

Spread across the table were piles of books and documents, to which Kiefer added yet another tome that she'd finished reading, as she let out a sigh.

"... Ah, geez, what's with this!? It's as if all the information I want to know has disappeared."

Right.

Almost all of the information she wanted to know was missing.

Either ripped out or stained...

Either way, it seemed as if it were being concealed.

As of right now, there was information on the foundation of the **Alpha Stigma**. That... she'd at least gotten her hands on.

Kiefer again looked at the reference books she'd opened up.

In them, this was what was written.

*- When they're born, their appearance is no different from that of human children.*

*- For whatever reason, a five-star pentacle design appears in their eyes as they become **Alpha Stigma** bearers.*

*- It seems that these eyes can clearly see the truth of the world. By reading the compositions in the air, they immediately understand all magic.*

*- For whatever reason, they go berserk. The collapse of the truth. They attempt to erase the composition of all.'*

- *Once they go berserk, an **Alpha Stigma** bearer cannot return to how they were before.*

"... But Ryner returned,"

Kiefer murmured to herself.

In Roland, where the **Alpha Stigma** was widely despised as taboo, information and documents didn't leave the country... but it was something that every country knew.

And in every reference book, it was written that after going berserk once, the **Alpha Stigma** bearer couldn't return to normal.

However, Kiefer knew that Ryner had regained his sanity after going berserk.

Just what did this mean?

*There are three possibilities, she thought.*

One:

Ryner wasn't an ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearer.

Two:

Ryner's willpower was able to suppress the power of the **Alpha Stigma**.

But she felt that the chances of this weren't likely. Kiefer had seen Ryner go berserk with her own eyes.

And that... compared to the documents and texts of neighbouring countries that recorded when an **Alpha Stigma** bearer had gone berserk, some of it...

No, too much varied.

If an ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearer went berserk, one unit would be enough to kill them.

But for Ryner...

There, Kiefer opened to the front of the reference book.



An illustration was printed, and this information.

Staring at that, she narrowed her eyes.

The third guess.

The one she thought had the lowest probability...

Ryner, who possessed eyes with a vermillion five-star pentacle...

Wasn't an **Alpha Stigma** bearer—something like that.

"....."

Then, just what was he?

Kiefer stared at the front.

Other countries' data on the **Alpha Stigma** didn't include a sketched illustration like this one.

It was a pattern of some kind.

And written at the top of the page, as the title...

Regarding the **Cursed Eyes**.

"**Cursed Eyes**..."

That was new information.

Despite that, the first few pages... the pages that contained what she wanted to know most of all had been ripped out.

It was the same as the other reference books and texts.

"... Uu... like a half-dead snake<sup>[\[1\]](#)</sup>..."

Just when she'd thought she'd finally gotten a lead, it felt as if she'd been abused and dropped into hell.

She was getting dizzy from the disappointment.

Kiefer clutched her head, and then,

"I'll—I'll rest for a bit..."

She said, before suddenly,

"Oh? You're finally taking a break? Then, do you want some tea?"

A man's voice said from behind her.

On top of that, it was a familiar voice.

It was a voice she'd heard only once before.

But even if she'd only heard it once, it was an unforgettable, forceful voice.

*This voice has to be...*

*But, why...*

*It can't be...*

Kiefer looked behind her.

However, before her eyes was the man she'd expected.

Long, loose wavy, brown... or rather, unique peach-coloured hair.

His body was thin, but trained.

And his eye. His left eye was closed, as if stuck in a wink...

Even with only one eye, it didn't falter at all, exuding self-confidence and ambition.

*It's an attractive eye, she thought.*

In the center hid strong determination... However, it also shined with a child-like innocence.

Riphal Edea.

That was this man's name. But most didn't call him that.

This country... no, the northern continent's people called this man something else.

The northern continent's supreme ruler...

Or the young king of the Gastark Empire.

But she had seen him only once.

The figure of him swinging his sword.

It was an unusual sight.

A long black sword three times his height...

He'd offered up a sacrifice to that sword...

And with only one swing, he'd easily slaughtered tens of thousands of Stohl's soldiers—it was that sight.

As the price for releasing the sword's power, Riphah's left eye had been consumed.

Providing its abilities with sustenance, he'd released the sword's power.

Losing his left eye, killing tens of thousands of enemies...

Nevertheless, this king didn't change, with his unwavering, strong eye.

Even though he'd spoken with a painfully sad expression as if he were about to cry.

*"... There's no way I'll let this sacrifice be in vain. There's no way I'll forget this sight. There's no way my sins will disappear. I am a slaughterer. I am the king of slaughter. If you want to curse me, then go ahead. But, even so...*

*Even so, I will advance forwards..."*

Kiefer stared at Riphah.

With only one look, she knew.

This man was a benevolent ruler.

Charisma, popularity, valour... It was of a different type than Sion's, but he held all of the factors of a ruler.

Gastark's strong spirit.

It wasn't because of that sword. It was because this man was strong.

The will of this man who, for the sake of his dream, would cast away his own

body...

To that.

Kiefer was afraid.

Why was Gastark's king in this kind of remote area?

No, of course, even if she were to call it a remote area, it was still, on paper, Gastark's capital...

However, according to the information Kiefer had gotten a hold of, he was supposed to be in Stohl right now.

After gaining control over Stohl, he should be busy with overseeing matters there...

However, in reality, Riphall was in front of her.

Riphall gazed at Kiefer with a paradoxically gentle yet sharp eye.

His smiling face that seemed to be thinking of something and yet held no tricks, giving off the impression of being utterly honest.

"So, are there any kinds of tea that you like or dislike?"

Honestly, it was an attractive smiling face.

Already, she wanted to praise it without meaning to.

Just like that, a woman might be enchanted by that smiling face at first glance.

But Kiefer stiffened her body.

Staring at Riphall, she said,

"... Not really. In terms of what I like or dislike, there isn't really anything. If I had to pick something, though, then I'd have to say that I dislike men who stalk girls."

He made a surprised face. Then, with a somewhat troubled face, his eyebrows turned down at the corners, and, "Oh, you noticed?"

He replied rather honestly.

But at that, Kiefer wanted to groan.

At her own foolishness.

This man wasn't an idiot.

Why hadn't she realized that...

During the war, this man had noticed that she wasn't one of Stohl's people. In that case, wouldn't he investigate which country she came from?

And in that case, sooner or later, if she turned out to be from a country that they were fighting, she would be arrested and made to reveal the secrets of her country's magic.

But Riphah had let Kiefer go.

No, it wasn't that he let her go. For the sake of figuring out why she'd come to Stohl, he'd let her wander about freely.

Of course, Kiefer... wasn't travelling the world just for show.

If they didn't constantly tail her, they wouldn't be able to see her reveal her true character.

But... she hadn't noticed at all this time. Even though she should've realize it if she thought about it. Even though she was confident that she could shake off any such skillful stalkers if she put some effort into it.

No, contrary to that self-confidence, hadn't an opportunity presented itself?

The power of Riphah's sword...

Seeing the overwhelming power of that sword that was entirely like Ryner's **Alpha Stigma**... She had finally gotten hold of a lead, hadn't she?

At any rate, she cursed her carelessness.

She hadn't noticed the presence of a stalker.

In any case, there was no point in trying to escape anymore, as Gastark's soldiers had likely surrounded the library.

*What should I do?*

She moaned that in her heart.

*What should I do?*

*Should I choose death?*

She thought, briefly contemplating suicide.

If she were to cough up the secrets of their magic, it would cause trouble for Roland...

No, or her birth country that she was no longer a part of—regarding the fact that she was from the Kingdom of Estabul, if she were to reveal Estabul's magic system, escaping further investigation would be...

But within herself, she rejected that.

That was a naive way of thinking.

Torture.

Drugs.

Brainwashing magic.

There were numerous methods.

"....."

She began to gather her strength. With all of her strength, she would try to escape this place.

There were two options.

Somehow escape from here, or die...

In order to gather up all her strength...

But then, Riphah smiled.

"Ah, that kind of tension won't do. There isn't anything, after all."

To those words that seemed to see straight through her, Kiefer frowned without thinking.

But Riphah continued.

"By the way, there aren't any soldiers surrounding the library. If you're thinking about running away, you're free to at any time. So it's fine even if you don't escape right now, you know?"

At that...

Kiefer glared at Riphah and spoke.

"... Heh. In other words, it doesn't matter to you even if I escape because you've already done an investigation on me?"

But Riphah shook his head.

"Nope. My subordinates wanted to investigate, but I told them to stop."

"Why?"

With a confident, honest face,

"Because trying to implore a woman is only fun when it's straightforward, of course,"

He declared energetically.

"....."

In response, Kiefer asked in a somewhat lethargic voice,

"... Implore for what, exactly?"

Immediately.

"For sex,"

Again, in an energetic voice.

It was then that she realized it

He was a serious one.

He was a serious *idiot*.

And in the moment she realized that, she felt all of her strength leave her body.

As if her tension recoiled, her voice now became tired, as she spoke.

"... Wait, not straightforward...? Or rather, I thought your aim was to elicit information out of me... No, besides that, that's why you're offering tea? Because you're trying to flirt with me? I mean, isn't that a cliché tactic?"

In that moment, Riphah made a surprised face.



Bulls-eye.

Kiefer pressed her temple on account of this huge idiot.

"... You're really easy to understand."

At that, Riphah laughed cheerfully again.

It was the laughter of a man. Without thinking, she felt happy herself.

Riphah spoke.

"Then, if that's how it is, let's have some tea."

And then he easily moved behind Kiefer. Like that, to an elderly who'd been reading this entire time, "So, old man, let me borrow the kitchen for a bit."

Without lifting his head from the book, the old man spoke.

"Don't you dare get it dirty, Edea youngster."

"....."

That was the conversation between the king and the head of the library...

Not to mention that Riphah had left his back open.

"... Honestly, just what is this?"

Kiefer said with an astounded face.

"You... Has it not occurred to you at all that I could be an assassin from another country?"

Looking slightly over his shoulder, a smile arose in Riphah's face as he spoke.

As expected, it was a voice full of confidence.

"I'd like to think I have a good eye for women."

"... To go with your cliché way of picking up woman, huh?"

Kiefer said sarcastically; however, Riphah's smile widened in a mischievous manner.

"It's fine. Even if you know that it's cliché, you'll still come along for the information on the Cursed Eyes that I can give you... so I'm waiting expectantly."

"Eh... wait, you..."

But before Kiefer could finish, Riphah disappeared into the room behind the counter.

Kiefer stared, dumbfounded, and then frowned again.

"What was that about trying to flirt... In the end, weren't you just investigating me...?"

"....."

There was no reply.

As Riphah wasn't there, the library had suddenly become quiet.

The library head, as usual, continued to read his book.

"... What a weird country..."

Kiefer muttered, and then sat up straight in her chair.



The tea Riphah made was unexpectedly delicious. Lightly bitter, it was mixed with herbs that she couldn't decipher, with a unique aroma.

Was it a tea special to the northern continent? The south... More than that, for Kiefer, who'd come from the southern most edge of the continent, it wasn't a taste she'd ever had.

Then, Riphah asked,

"Is it good?"

Annoyingly, it certainly was good. At Kiefer's nod, Riphah's face lit up.

"See? Isn't it good? It's rare tea, you know? You can't find it anywhere outside of this village... I drank it often while growing up,"

He said that sort of thing.

With that smiling face, he spoke proudly of the tea. He spoke proudly of the village where he was born.

He was happy as he boasted of such things.

That kind of scene.

*You're such a kid!* Kiefer instinctively wanted to retort that.

"Feel free to have a second up."

He held up the teapot, speaking while smiling happily—Kiefer looked at this man's face... and then felt like smiling back without thinking...

Kiefer turned away from Riphah.

"I still have some left."

"Is that so? Well, the offer's always open."

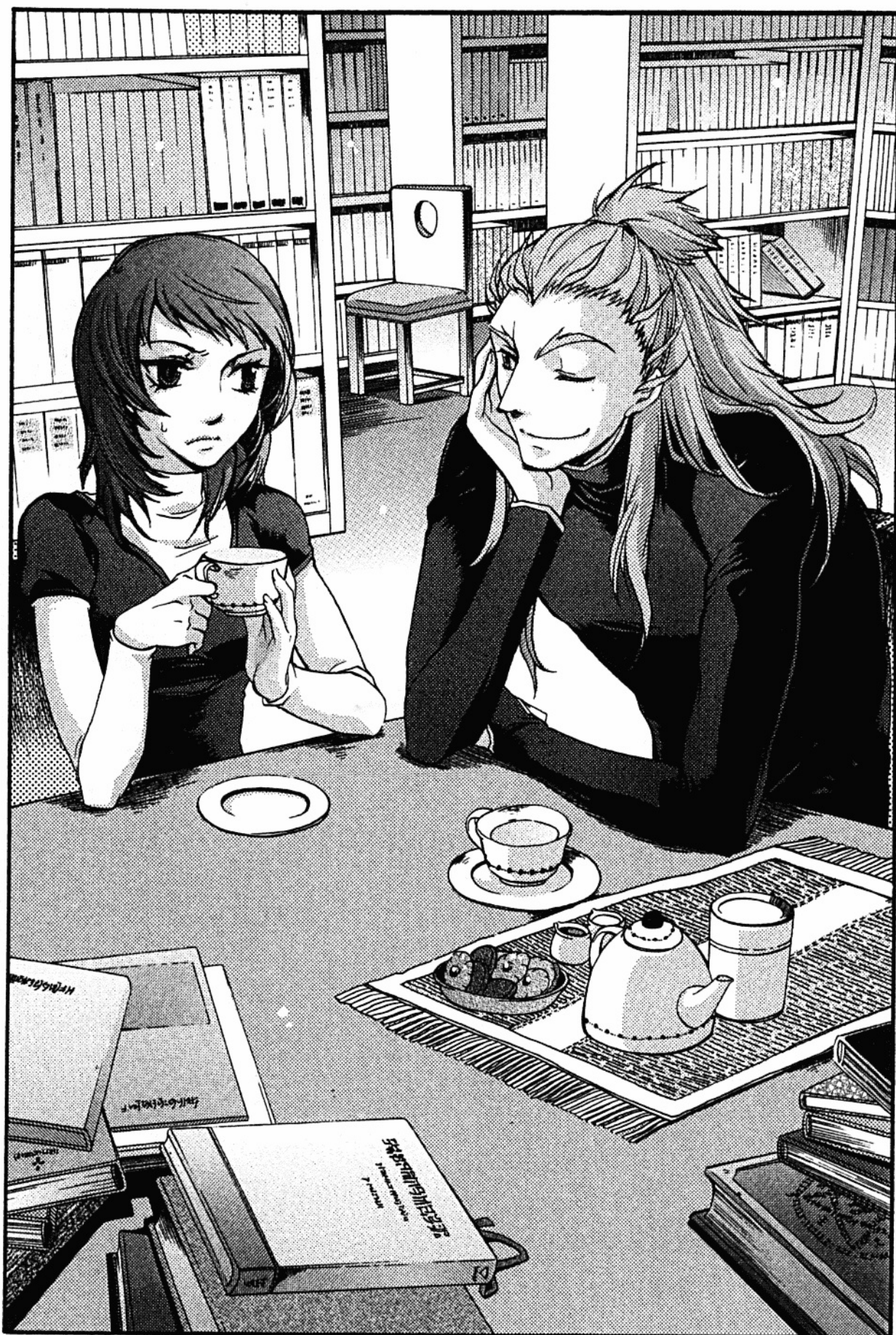
"R-Right. More importantly, hurry up and talk. You said you'd tell me the information I want to know?"

Riphah then turned his gaze to the pile of texts and reference books that Kiefer had spread across the table, and laughed again.

"The information you want isn't there at all?"

Kiefer tensed again at those words.

The information she wanted. All of it was in the ripped and stained parts...



"... Did you give the instructions to tear out pages?"

But Riphah shook his head, and,

"No, I didn't give any order like that. The one who ripped apart and dirtied the books was me."

Kiefer trembled at that.

This man already knew what Kiefer would come here for and, anticipating that, had disposed of the information.

Honestly, what was that about flirting...

As Kiefer's thoughts whirled, Riphah continued.

"No, well, for the books here that have been torn apart and dirtied—it was when I was a kid."

"... Eh, k-kid?"

Then, the old man who was now at the counter—

"Pretty miss there. It's as I said to that rowdy kid. When you treat books with disrespect like that, you're disrespecting the authors who wrote those books..."

"Yes, yes, you've told me that a million times, old man—I get it. I'm already an adult now, so..."

"Adult? You're saying you're an adult? You're still just a fifteen-year-old brat..."

"I'm already twenty-three! Geez, old man, since when did your sense of time stop..."

However, even as Riphah said that, he still seemed happy. Even if he was being treated like a child from the old man, he still seemed utterly happy...

He then spoke to Kiefer in a quiet voice.

"... Honestly. Don't tell anyone else, but that old man's gone a bit senile..."

"I'm not senile—!"

In that instant, a tome flew through the air and struck Riphah in the head.

"Ow—!? Hey, old man, aren't you the one treating the books with disrespect!?"

"Fool. That was divine punishment from the god of books just now!"

Kiefer, while tense, watched that kind of exchange.

Was this for real?

Watching their exchange, it didn't seem like it was a trap, with the troublemaker of the village and the hand of the scorched elderly... She was looking at something like that...

While rubbing the back of his head where the book had hit him, Riphah spoke.

"The punishment of the god of books... huh..."

And looking over at her, he asked,

"Do you believe in any god?"

To that question,

"... Are you trying to interrogate me?"

Kiefer returned with a question of her own.

Did she believe in a god?

If she came from a country with a religious system... It was fine to exchange that kind of information, wasn't it?

But Riphah shrugged, and,

"Shouldn't I want to know everything about the woman I've fallen for?"

He stared at her. With a smiling face—

"Private Kiefer Knolles."

"....."

Truly, this man was...

*He's tricky, isn't he?*

She thought that.

She hadn't given him her name.

But this man already knew it.

Just how...

"Just how much did you..."

She began, but Riphah interrupted.

"Only your name."

"Liar."

"You don't believe me?"

"I don't. What meaning is there in only researching my name?"

But Riphah easily answered,

"I wanted to know the name of the beautiful woman I've gone through great lengths to meet again."

"That kind of flattery doesn't tell me anything."

"I wasn't flatteri..."

"Don't mock me!"

She shouted without thinking.

In the end... he was just playing around. He was only playing around. He probably researched Kiefer's origins—everything—and so was just playing around with her like this.

*Like I thought, this man is just like anyone else from any other country...*

There... Her thoughts began to whirl around, but she stopped herself.

The man before her made a plainly sad expression...

"... Hm? Are you shaking? ... This isn't good. Could it be that you're afraid? This... Ah, crap. This is bad. Honestly, I meant everything I said..."

"....."

*I won't be deceived*, Kiefer thought. After all, this man was just playing around.

"I honestly didn't research anything but your name. I thought you were



pretty, so..."

*I won't be deceived!*

Kiefer glared at Riphah even more sharply.

"Even though you knew I was investigating the **Alpha Stigma**... how dare you try and claim that you only researched my name..."

But in response, with a troubled face, Riphah pointed to the tabletop...

There, an open book about the Cursed Eyes lay...

"Ah..."

Without thinking, Kiefer let her voice leak.

C-Certainly, if he looked at that, he would be able to make a guess as to what she was investigating, wouldn't he?

B-But...

"But, you were trying to figure out the religion of my country..."

At that, Riphah again easily replied,

"I asked that because, in order to explain about the Cursed Eyes, I had to know what your general idea of gods were... It was a bad way of asking, huh? I mean, you're a beautiful woman travelling alone away from home. You'd have to become wary and strong. It was my bad. I won't make the same mistake again."

Then, the man's eye became sharp.

The atmosphere changed. It was no longer the frivolous, explanatory atmosphere...

It was heavy, low...

"I... have no intention of killing you. The same goes for torture. Kiefer, if I intended to kill you, then I would've done so in that place from the beginning."

It was that of a king's.

This was this man's true appearance.

Instinctively, she was overpowered.

"W-What? You can't just suddenly address me by my name like that."

After saying such a thing, she immediately regretted it. Her stiff voice.

Foolish words.

She'd already been utterly defeated.

But the king laughed at that.

With the smiling face of a child with no worries, he spoke.

"So relax, Kiefer. Are you relieved now?"

"....."

Annoyingly, she did feel somewhat relieved.

Everything was at this man's pace.

Even though she told him not to address her by her name, he immediately did so again anyway...

Kiefer spoke, discouraged.

"You... just do whatever you want, huh...?"

Again, he easily—

"Because I'm king."

"... Haa. So you can do all this because you're king?"

"Do you dislike it?"

"I do,"

She replied immediately.

And she looked at Riphah.

As always, at Kiefer's words just now, he was making an expression that could easily be read...

Kiefer again let out a sigh.

"Geez—yes, yes. It wasn't that bad up until now, okay? It's better than those annoying nobles who never speak the truth, at least."

And.

Those nobles who'd killed her sisters, deceived her, and made use of her...

To the Kiefer who'd betrayed her mother country and friends, those honest and straightforward words glowed.

With that kind of appeal and shine... If she were to keep talking, it'd be unpleasant for her.

At any rate, she realized that she'd end up betraying this man as well...

But then,

"Look at this,"

Riphal took out three sheets of paper and placed them on the table in front of Kiefer.

"Eh... wait, what..."

However, looking at the illustrations and writing on the paper, she stopped.

Immediately, she picked them up to confirm for herself.

Drawn there were numerous patterns.

Five-star pentacles, crosses...

The title was *Regarding the **Cursed Eyes***.

Its side edge was torn.

All of its contents were there.

The contents that Kiefer wanted to know...

But that...

However, Riphal began talking at his own convenience.

"Well, most of what's written there is old terminology, so I'll explain without you having to read it. We've confirmed that from the start, of the **Cursed Eye** monsters, there've only been five types..."

"F-Five types!?"

Again, at this new and sudden information, Kiefer let her voice slip out

reflexively.

Even though this wasn't the place for it.

In the end, this man had been investigating Kiefer after all. He knew that she'd been researching the **Alpha Stigma**.

Otherwise, he wouldn't be carrying these papers...

*This is bad.*

She thought.

If she didn't escape from here...

But Riphah, unmindful of her feelings, continued calmly.

"So, the difficulty of hunting these monsters... Well, I should explain in order...

In order of weakest to strongest,

**Torch Curse**

**Alpha Stigma**

**Ebra Crypt**

For these, well, encountering them isn't a problem.

But...

**Will Heim**

**Iino Doue**

These two are a bit troublesome..."

At those contents, she couldn't move.

At the appeal of what Riphah was saying, she couldn't move.

It was all of the information that Kiefer had been seeking.

Even though she should be thinking about escaping right now, different thoughts whirled around in her head.

There were five types of **Cursed Eyes**...

Furthermore, one way or another, it seemed that the power of the **Alpha Stigma** wasn't considered to be very strong.

But.

Regarding Kiefer's guess that Ryner's **Alpha Stigma** wasn't an **Alpha Stigma**...

It was possible that Ryner's eyes were one of the other **Cursed Eyes** that Riphah had spoken of...

Then, interrupting her thoughts, Riphah spoke.

"Well, before I continue, I should tell you that what's written there from this point on is pretty bad and kept secret from other countries.

But do you still want to know?"

"....."

She decided that she wanted to know.

Honestly, this man did whatever he wanted.

Riphah continued.

"By the way, so far, we're probably the only country that's investigated the **Cursed Eyes** in such detail. For a few reasons, there were a lot of **Cursed Eye** bearers in this region...

Well, those reasons are a secret.

In addition to that, I've ordered my subordinates to go around the world and dig out every piece of info they can get. After all, in this library, it seems that all of the important parts have been ripped out, huh?

The keywords...

The Sacred Sword.

Cursed Eyes.

Contract.

Hero.

And... God.

All of it sounds like they came out of a fairy tale that you read to children. That's why no one else has realized it.

Even if they did..."

What he was trying to say, she understood.

That was why Riphah's expression was again clearly sad.

And... she recalled the words Riphah had said once before.

*"Those who kill and don't regret it are scum."*

Right.

They were killed.

Gathering information in other lands. And those who realized it were killed...

That was how it was.

She understood the reasoning behind it as well.

That sword.

That sword that, with a single swing, dealt a devastating blow to Stohl's army...

If they were to fight with someone else who used such a thing, in an instant, there would surely be nothing left in the world but destruction.

Riphah's expression became further strained. As if he were trying to endure the pain.

"... Nevertheless, the world has begun to realize it. Here... to this kind of near-inhospitable land and ordinary, remote village, no one would come. Those who would come... just as you, Kiefer, are only those seeking information.

Someone wishing for help.

Someone wishing for power.

But both come together. The situation is steadily growing worse. We're out of time. That's why, at least, to sacrifice as few as possible..."

Then, Kiefer finished those words.

"You'll become this world's ruler...?"

Then,

"Yeah,"

Riphal nodded.

But that expression wasn't of one that desired the world.

It was full of pain, sadness, and regret.

And, as he would nevertheless advance forwards, strength.

Kiefer spoke.

"Then, will you kill me as well...?"

"No. Didn't I say so before? I've got no intention of killing you. I haven't given you any information that I'd need to kill you for, Kiefer."

After saying that, Riphal stared straight at her.

Truly straightforward.

No sense of intimidation.

Perhaps he was telling the truth.

She could still make a choice.

She had two options.

To not ask for information and leave this village?

Ask for information, and then cooperate with Riphal... with Gastark?

Riphal gently held out his hand.

And he spoke.

"Will you come with me?"

It was a kind voice.

An attractive voice.

*And I... don't dislike this man.*

Right. Perhaps, if she took his hand, she would find happiness.



Surely, there were countless people who, desiring information, would take his hand.

Those who desired the world would do so.

Like that, Gastark would expand.

Perhaps one day, the world would be in their hands.

In that case, was there anything wrong with her taking his hand?

That was why. Kiefer held out her hand.

She took Riphah's hand.

And she spoke.

"Tell me this information."

At that, Riphah again made a face that was easy to read; however, it was a smiling face that would enchant anyone who looked at it.

Without thinking, Kiefer smiled back.

But that was a familiar act.

For her, who was always lying and continued to wear a fake smile, it was a familiar act.

She had chosen a third option.

She would get a hold of the information; however, she would then betray him.

It was possible that she would be killed...

Then Kiefer, suddenly sensing someone's presence, turned her attention to outside the window.

There, a number of men in black robes who'd been hiding up until now disappeared the moment she saw them...

"....."

The air was filled with killing intent.

Nevertheless, smiling, Kiefer gazed at Riphah with a kind look.

At the supreme ruler of the northern continent.

And, in a quiet voice that couldn't be heard,

"... I won't lose, no matter what,"

She murmured.

## Translator's Notes

1. [↑](#) Kiefer's referring to a saying about a half-dead snake that, stuck halfway, can't reach an end—aka she's frustrated over her lack of progress.

## Chapter 6: Because you're already cursed

"... They're late."

Ferris was waiting.

For information from her manservants.

The location was the Eris house's garden.

By Sion's order, the strangely cheerful manservant Calne, as he was called, and the inexplicably constantly angry manservant Eslina, as she was called, were to report to her as soon as they discovered Ryner's whereabouts...

She looked towards the distance.

The sun's light dyeing the sky a bright red, she looked towards the forests in the Eris house's vast lands...

"... They're too late."

She was irritated.

Ryner had left his inn yesterday.

And she knew that if Ryner had been walking all through the night, he would've been able to cross the country border and leave Roland.

Ferris knew better than anyone else that in contrast to that man's lazy appearance, his abilities were quite high.

Despite that, she was still here...

Furthermore, no leads had been found.

Like this...

"... Like this, will it become impossible to track Ryner down?"

With an emotionless face, she murmured.

But her irritation grew worse.

As light fell and the sky became red, her irritation became stronger.

She recalled Ryner's face that she'd seen at the end.

The expression of that eternally listless, lazy, useless man.

But...

Nevertheless, for a moment, Ferris felt uncomfortable.

It was different from usual...

"....."

*No, I remember that face,*

She thought.

When she'd met Ryner...

When she'd first met Ryner, the way that man had smiled.

She remembered that somehow vague, half-cocked smiling face of Ryner's...

"... Muu."

Again, for some reason, she felt irritated.

In addition to the irritation, her chest started to hurt...

Ferris was surprised at what was happening inside of her.

She was surprised at the large waves of the emotions that she'd never had before.

"... What is this..."

It was as if something was tightening in her chest...

"This is..."

In her mind arose Ryner's smile.

"This is..."

Ryner's truly half-cocked smile...

That—there, in her head, Ryner suddenly began to talk.

*"Uhehehehe. I'm leaving you. I'm not gonna meet up with you. It's way too troublesome. I'm gonna run away by myself, go after women in the neighbouring country, and take some afternoon naaaaaaaaaaaaaaps!"*

Immediately,

*"I'm coming after you, you damn idiot Ryner. If I find you, I'll kill you without fail."*

In other words, that sort of thing.

In her mind was the stupid, proud face of Ryner. Even though she wanted to punch that, not being near him made her angry.

"I see."

The cause of her irritation.

Now that she could understand why her chest hurt, she relaxed slightly.

Then,

"Honestly... what is that Calne guy doi..."

But then her words stopped.

She redirected her eyes from the red-dyed sky to the top of a garden stone.

And.

"What do you want? Brother."

The moment she spoke, a single man appeared there.

The same blond hair as hers.

Closed eyes, ceramic-like skin.

Lucile Eris.

Ferris stared at Lucile, and,

"... Have you been watching this entire time?"

At that,

"Always."

Lucile smiled.

"Ever since you were young, Ferris, I've always... always been watching you."

But in contrasting to her smiling proper, Ferris's face was neutral.

She gazed at the fading light.

The sky was becoming dark.

The day was ending.

Like this, another day had passed since Ryner had disappeared.

If that guy was walking, then surely...

Ferris narrowed her eyes.

She stopped looking at the sky.

And,

"Brother."

"What is it?"

"What did you do to Ryner?"

She asked that.

At the question, Lucile smiled again. And easily,

"I merely warned him that I wouldn't want him making any passes at my younger sister."

"....."

In that moment, Ferris looked at Lucile.

As expected, Lucile was smiling. But in that smile, there was absolutely no emotion.

Ferris was fearful of that face.

That mask-like face.

But she was different. She had the same blonde hair, blue eyes, and features... but she was different.

Her face wasn't emotionless.



Over there, there truly was nothing.

A cold, inhuman expression.

It was as if he wasn't even human...

Her thoughts began, but then a different expression arose in Lucile's face. A troubled sort of wry smile... However, with that crafted, false expression arising, he spoke.

"Oh? What is this? Are you glaring at me? Ferris. That's a new expression. I haven't seen it before. Have you obtained a new emotion?"

"....."

The mask continued.

"And so again, you're becoming an adult, Ferris. Even though you were still small just before..."

"....."

The mask continued.

In response, Ferris...

In response, she trembled and didn't move.

Just what was before her eyes...

What in the world was...

That, she didn't know.

Trembling, she was unable to move.

It'd always been like that since that day.

Since that day when she was saved by Lucile, it'd always...

He spoke in an increasingly kind tone to Ferris.

"Truly. To see my beloved sister gradually grow gladdens me, yet makes me feel a bit lonely."

"....."

Trembling, she said nothing.

*On that day, just what did Brother become?*

"Truly, it makes me feel lonely. That someday, you'll go somewhere my hands can't reach."

"....."

*Everything changed on that day.*

*There isn't any question about that.*

*And it was likely... in order to save me.*

*But Brother...*

"Brother, just what on that day..."

Ferris tried to say that, but Lucile looked to the side. And,

"They've come, Ferris."

"Hmm?"

Ferris looked in the same direction.

But she saw nothing there.

A vast garden.

Nobody was there.

"What do you mean, Br..."

She began, but when she looked back, Lucile was no longer there...

"... He gave me the slip...?"

Could it be...

Then.

The sound of the Eris house's gates opening.

But it was a faint sound. A truly faint, soft sound. The distance from this garden to the gates was considerably far.

Even if the gates opened, had it not been for Lucile's urging, she wouldn't have heard it.

However, Lucile had reacted to the arrival of a visitor before the gates opened.

"....."

It was overwhelming.

The difference in power was too great.

No, all her life, even with all of Ferris's ability, she was no match for Lucile.

A genius.

Correct.

A literal genius.

Nevertheless...

While looking towards the visitors guided by their steward, Croselli, Ferris thought.

Even so, she wasn't able to sense the presences of people far away.

To be able to do such a thing...

"....."

However, Ferris said nothing on that.

Her face was eternally blank. But in a way, it was a slightly sullen, remorseful face.

"... Just where did Brother go..."

But, as expected, her words stopped there.



To go back in time a bit.

In the streets near Roland's palace.

Eslina knit her well-arranged, pretty eyebrows.

And,

"Honestly."

Matching her eyebrows was pretty amber-coloured hair. Level-headed eyes that didn't suit her still young age of fourteen.

With those eyes, Eslina looked to her superior officer by her side, and,

"Calne-san, are you paying attention!?"

"Eh? Paying attention? Ah, of course!"

Saying that while he walked, he had a boyish face.

No, he was already eighteen years old. Though he was at an age where he couldn't be called a boy anymore... Giving a soft impression, he had wavy blond hair, childish blue eyes, and a slender body.

In addition to that,

"Funfufu~♪"

Even if she looked at the figure that was humming as he strolled lightly through the streets, the still young Eslina would say that more than a young man, the term 'boy' would be more appropriate.

However, his title was...

Major General Calne Kaiwal of the Roland Empire's army.

Though, ever since the revolution, he should've been acting alongside Claugh as Sion's right-hand man, being a sharp and able person...

Calne spoke.

"Ah!? Eslina, look at that, look at that..."

"Eh? Ah, what is it?"

"Isn't the wife of that pastrymaker gorgeous..."

"Calne-san, didn't I told you before to stop that!? This isn't the place for that!"

After shouting, Eslina let out a sigh. Then, looking to the pastry shop, she saw the woman standing in front...

Certainly, she was a beauty.

But even if she was beautiful, she was clearly in her forties or fifties...

Looking at that, Eslina again knit her brow.

That Calne and adult... Or rather, that he liked much older women, she knew. Rather than a girl like herself, it was attractive, sultry women that...

But maybe that would change someday, she thought.

After all, one day she'd grown up and become a woman... That was what she thought.

Certainly, she was only a fourteen-year-old girl right now. But recently, she was starting to understand Calne's pattern of preference.

Like this, maybe in a few more years.

Right.

In a few more years, surely... she would triumph over her superior officer who treated her like a child.

That was what she thought.

Despite that...

The woman His Majesty had introduced them to today was still young.

She seemed to be around the same age as Calne?

She didn't fit under Calne's preferences. She didn't have that sultry appeal to her. At any rate, the first thing she'd said, in spite of it being their first meeting, was, *"In other words, from now on, I am the almighty ruler of you two."*

But even though she'd said such things, it was if she could get away with it because she was beautiful.

A woman who could enchant others on sight...

*It's unfair.*

Eslina thought that. Even though she was working so hard to become Calne's type.

*"Uwa!? What a beauty! I have no problems with working with a beauty like this, Sion-san. Hurray. I love you, Sion-san!"*

*It's unfair.*

She thought that.

Even though she truly was doing her best... Calne wouldn't look at her at all.

Was it because she had no charm?

Or was it because she was the younger sister of her brother, Fiole Folkal...?

Then, Calne spoke again. Cheerfully squinting with his child-like eyes,

"Ah, that bookstore lady's..."

"Geez! Calne-san, why are you always, always... Find this Ryner Lute properly as per your duty..."

Calne interrupted her words, speaking.

"Eh? I'm not searching for that Ryner guy?"

"Ehhhh!?"

Eslina exploded.

On His Majesty's orders, they were to search for Ryner Lute, who'd disappeared yesterday.

Despite that, he said he wasn't searching for Ryner...

"Then, then, what are we doing right now?"

"Searching for a person."

"T-That's right. Searching for Ryner-san..."

"I'm not searching for him, you know?"

"Then, who are you..."

But then interrupting her again,

"Found you, Major General,"

Suddenly, a voice spoke from behind them.

"Eh!?"

Eslina said, surprised as she turned around, where four men were...

Eslina knew these men.

They were Calne's subordinates. But they weren't people from the army. One could see that they weren't dressed in the military uniform. Their ages varied from the twenties to thirties, with no sense of unity.

Nevertheless, with one glance, it was clear they weren't ordinary people. Sharp glint in their eyes. Movements with no openings.

Those men bowed their heads to Calne, and,

"The time it took..."

However, Calne shook his head.

"It's fine. You were rather fast."

To those words, the men again bowed their heads. With admiration towards Calne, their expressions were loyal.

It was a strange sight. It was if adults were bowing their heads to a child.

Calne spoke. With his typical cheerful, child-like voice, he said,

"All right then, let's go, Eslina. We've found our mark."

"I-Is what's been found Ryner-san..."

But immediately—

"Like I said, I'm not looking for him."

"Then, then, just what..."

"You'll know soon."

Like that, Calne turned to the men.

"Then, the location?"

"Presently, the mark is walking down an alleyway through the side."

"Hmm... shall we go at once?"

At that, Eslina said,

"Like I said, just who..."

But again, her words stopped. Calne grabbed her hand and started pulling her along.

At that, instinctively,

"....."

She felt her face turn red.

And then immediately, she realized that having her hand held by Calne was a normal occurrence, and so became embarrassed over her being flustered.

As they entered a dark, crowded alleyway,

"Y-You can let go of my hand already..."

But as she said that,

"I'm not letting go."

"Eh..."

Calne gripped her hand more tightly.

To that, Eslina—

"Eh... um, i-it hurts. Calne-sa..."

But before she could finish, she was tugged along strongly.

"Ah..."

In that moment, she thought he was going to hold her. His chest grew closer. His face grew closer. And he casually covered Eslina.

*Eh!?*

Her voice wouldn't come out.

Kept behind Calne, she was in such a position that she'd likely fall over, but she did her best to keep her balance.

"Wha, this is... Unsteady... ah... fuu..."

While doing her best to stay up,

"H-Hold on, Calne-san. Just what is..."

She said as she looked over her shoulder; however,

"Ehhhhhhhh—!?"



She continued in that voice.

The scene that she saw.

In the alleyway, four men had collapsed. They were Calne's subordinates. Those four subordinates who'd seemed strong to Eslina had collapsed...

In exchange, within the darkness, a single man stood.

It was evidently this man who'd taken down Calne's subordinates...

*I-In other words, we're being attacked? Right now, we're being attacked—!?*

Shaking, Eslina strengthened her will.

"Calne-san, run..."

She meant to step out in front of Calne and let him alone escape...

But she was pushed back by Calne and unable to move in front of him.

"Eh..."

Together with that voice, she fell onto the ground...

Without looking at her, Calne spoke.

"Ah, sorry, Eslina. But don't move for a little while. I have to speak with this guy... so..."

Calne's eyes were cheerful; however, their air felt like that of a different person's.

A sharp smile that was in a completely different level than back then with his subordinates.

And possessing the same air as those eyes was the man standing before them.

If one were to judge by his appearance, he seemed a bit older than Calne. Around in his early twenties, it seemed?

Clever eyes. Fair-skinned. Dressed in the uniform of Roland's army, his body was thin but seemed well-trained.

The man asked,

"Why have you been trailing me?"

In response, after looking at the fallen men, Calne shrugged.

"Isn't it the opposite? Haven't you been trailing my subordinates... Lear Rinkal-san?"

Unwavering, the calm expression of the man Calne called Lear became further cold, and, "And you're Calne Kaiwal. Equal to Claugh Klom, you are Sion Astal's left-hand man... correct? You..."

He began, but his words ended there.

Halfway through, Lear suddenly stopped and lunged forward with unbelievable force.

"Ha—!"

He let loose a punch.

It was so fast that Eslina wasn't even able to make a sound.

But at that, a smile arose in Calne's face.

"I figured that would happen."

Raising his right hand to block, he struck out with the palm of his left hand...

But,

"Nnn—"

Lear moved his head slightly back and dodged it

However, Calne didn't stop with his attack. He fired a kick towards Lear's chest.

To that strike,

"Guh..."

Lear moaned and jumped back.

*You did it...* Eslina wanted to say; however...

"Gahh..."

She was interrupted by Calne's moan.

Calne held his right arm in pain... That arm was bent at a slightly strange angle.

Looking at that, Eslina was about to cry out, before Calne fixed it with his left hand...

With an unpleasant sound, his arm was returned to normal.

And.

"That huuuurt. I've got no strength in my hand... Don't you think that's horrible? My muscles hurt!"

Calne glared at the man before him.

"... I'd intended to break it. Rather than that, you cracked my rib."

"Ah, I cracked it? Even though I'd intended to break it... but you know now, don't you? We seem to be of equal strength, right? However this goes, whoever wins, you won't be able to restrain me without getting hurt."

"....."

Lear said nothing.

However, Calne continued.



"Is that what you intended? In an honest exchange, you wouldn't be able to get the true information that you seek. In that case, you intend to make me talk by force..."

At that, Lear said,

"Under whose instructions are you all moving?"

"Sion-san."

"That's a lie."

"It's the truth. After all, I was told by Sion-san to search for you and Luke-san as well."

He said that.

At any rate, it seemed that Calne had been searching for this man called Lear.

*But why?*

Eslina asked herself. Why, even though they were supposed to be searching for Ryner Lute, was he searching for this man first?

Lear still didn't let his guard down at Calne's words. Maintaining his distance from Calne— "... That's also a lie."

Calne tilted his head, and,

"Why do you think that?"

"....."

However, Lear didn't respond and instead immediately looked thoughtful. Should he continue with this conversation, or should he stop...?

It seemed as if he were thinking about that. For a while, there was silence and no movement...

But then Calne made a slightly troubled face and held up his hands.

And he spoke.

"So, what now?"

"....."

In that moment, Lear's expression changed.

Though Eslina again didn't understand what was happening.

Lear spoke. With an increasingly cautious voice.

"... And if I intend... to kill you?"

But Calne shrugged his shoulders.

"If it's you, I won't die."

In other words, that sort of thing. Lear seemed surprised at Calne's lack of vigilance.

"... If you're an enemy, then I'll kill you."

"I'm not an enemy."

At that, Lear again looked thoughtful.

But Calne continued, as if pressing for an answer.

"What is it that you're afraid of? I've read your personal history—you shouldn't be the type to do such things. Usually calm... Within your force, your duty is usually to take one step away and gather information. If it's in that area, you're not even inferior to the famous Luke, whom Clough has a bone to pick with. You even cracked my joints so easily..."

He said, rubbing his arm in pain.

Then, staring at Lear again—

"... Just what..."

Immediately.

Lear lunged forward again. In just a second, he grabbed Calne's collar and shoved him against the wall...

Furthermore, with one hand, he took out a knife and pointed it at his neck...

"Kyaaa—!?"

There, Eslina finally cried out.

However, just as she moved to help him...

"Don't move, Eslina—!"

Calne yelled. And with just that,

"Ah..."

She wasn't able to move.

Confirming that, Calne smiled gently.

"Sooorry for yelling. Just don't move for a bit, okay~. It's for the best right now."

Like that, he looked at Lear. And,

"So? Just what are you so impatient about?"

Nevertheless, Lear's grip didn't loosen. Pushing Calne further against the wall,

"... Luke-sen... Sergeant Luke Stokkart and First Lieutenant Milk Callaud haven't been seen since the day before yesterday. Yesterday, Lach Velariore who'd been searching for them... and, as of this morning, Moe Velariore have disappeared. I'm the only one left. I suspect that this is the work of you scum."

To those words,

"Eh—!?"

Now it was Calne's turn to be surprised.

His eyes widening,

"W-Why us? Honestly, we're working under Sion-san's orders..."

But ignoring those words, Lear continued.

"According to my investigation, the army is moving. However, I haven't been able to get a hold of its tail at all. Did the nobles suggest this? But what merit is there in capturing us? Regarding that, if it were the level of a noble's instigation, it doesn't seem likely that they would be able to do anything to Luke-senpai..."

Like that, the knife dug into Calne's neck...

"But... Calne Kaiwal. You're strong. And a capable person. Who is it that works behind you? Answer me."

He dug the knife in deeper...

But to that, Calne—

"Like I said, Sion-san..."

"That's a lie."

The knife dug in even deeper. A bit of blood began to ooze out.

*Stop...*

Just as Eslina was about to call out without thinking, the knife was finally removed.

However, with the knife then pointed straight at Eslina,

"Tell me the truth. If you don't... I'll kill this woman."

Eslina trembled at that.

Killing intent was emitted. This man known as Lear was serious.

Despite that,

"Still going on about that? You won't be able to do such a thing..."

Calne began, but Lear interrupted.

"... I'm not able to be the sort of person who can remain silent even while his allies might be in danger."

"Huum. Then, you're serious about this?"

"Do you wish to see proof?"

But at that,

"... That's not a very funny joke,"

Calne's eyes suddenly narrowed. His courtesy, as the present situation arose, vanished.

And.

In a low voice, as if Eslina wasn't to hear it—

"... If you lay a hand on Eslina, I'll kill you."

"No, I'll kill her before then."



In that instant.

Again, the two of them moved.

Lear's arm that held the knife moved...

"Che—!"

Seizing Lear's arm, Calne struck upwards, and like that, threw him to the ground before Eslina.

It happened in just a moment.

Eslina saw.

Calne jumping out as if to protect her...

However, behind that, as a light smile arose and he slowly returned the knife to his pocket, was Lear...

With that, it was all over.

In front of Eslina, Calne's expression curved. Then, turning around at once,

"Like I said, that joke was the worst!"

He shouted.

Once more, it was Calne's usual voice. Eslina relaxed at that.

Lear spoke.

"I understand. If you were to die now, you would fail in your duties. Nevertheless, you protected that woman... That's good. That you truly had no intention of fighting me... I believe you."

It was a politer tone than before. Somehow, it seemed that this was his original tone. Though his tone was polite and cold, his expression, in some ways, was gentle.

Suddenly feeling her tension unwind, Eslina sighed.

Correcting his posture, Lear spoke.

"Pardon me for being slow in saying this. I... am Corporal Lear Rinkal. Your Excellency, Major General Calne Kaiwal. And..."

As he turned towards her, Eslina smiled and nodded.

"I'm Eslina Folkal. I'm Calne-san's private secretary."

Lear deeply bowed his head.

"To a woman of your degree, what I did was unthinkably impolite..."

"Eh, ah... n-no, um, please lift your head."

To that conversation, Calne looked astounded.

"Y-Your Excellency... I-I see... because I'm of higher ranking... but seriously, why is someone like this a Corporal? I understand why Sion-san was clutching his head..."

Further speaking, this Lear was like Luke and had sworn loyalty... and so went no further than Major Miller.

Even though it wouldn't be strange for those two to be of higher ranking than Calne, the two of them didn't want that and instead declined all promotions.

But Lear completely disregarded Calne's words and continued.

"Then, Your Excellency. As for me... what shall you do?"

Calne again frowned at that, and,

"Like I said, stop calling me 'Your Excellency.' "

Because he said that, for some reason, Eslina couldn't resist saying,

"Your Excellency—!"

Calne pressed at his temple in a tired manner.

"Seeee. Because children will imitate you, stop that. All right?"

"I-I'm not a child!"

"You're a child. You're still fourteen years old, after all."

"Aren't you only four years older than me, Calne-san!?"

"Then, how old do you think a child is, Eslina?"

"Eh—!? Ah... that... t-thirteen...?"

"Fuu..."

"W-What's that sigh for—!? A-Alternatively, Calne-san, your adult age is too high! Around forty, or fifty—!"

As Eslina yelled that, her cheeks swelled.

It looked entirely as if two children were having an argument.

Watching that exchange, Lear smiled, and then for some reason, made a sad expression as if he were recalling something.

"Good grief, please be safe. Captain Milk..."

"Eh?"

"No, it's nothing."

Immediately, his calm expression returned. Then,

"Then, as for me..."

Calne nodded.

"Somehow, it seems like there's been a disappearance fad lately, huh?"

"Ha?"

Lear asked back in an utterly clueless manner, which Calne didn't pay attention to and continued.

"Well, though we don't know if there's a connection to the disappearances of Luke-san and the others... the **Taboo Breaker** Ryner Lute you guys were chasing before has gone missing."

At those words.

Lear tilted his head to one side, and,

"... Gone missing?"

Calne nodded.

"Yes. Without informing Sion-san and his partner Ferris Eris of his whereabouts, he disappeared yesterday. So, Eslina and I have been given orders to search for him... that's what I wanted to ask of you. You, who normally gather information on Ryner Lute's movements..."

But.

Again, at that, Lear had a curious expression.

"... Ah, I understand. Hmm. That's... So he's gone missing? I did think it was a bit strange when I heard from my subordinates that Ryner Lute had made preparations for a journey and left his inn alone..."

To those words,

*"You know his whereabouts—!?"*

Calne and Eslina instinctively shouted at the same time.

But Lear spoke as if it were only natural.

"A **Taboo Breaker** is someone who, in the first place, learned the secrets of their country's magic and then disappeared from their country. The **Taboo Breaker** Pursuit Squad is someone who then follows and apprehends them... and so, as a rule, it is my duty to know their whereabouts beforehand."

Eslina and Calne shared a glance with each other.

Calne spoke.

"Then, where is Ryner Lute right now?"

Lear easily answered that.

"In Estabul territory. Furthermore, he's not taking the main route. Away from public gaze, he's taking the western mountain route. I know that much... However, as he's taking a discreet route..."

"On the contrary, it'll be easy to pursue him. Even if we knew which direction he was going from the beginning, we'd have no options. Iyaa, Lear-san, you've saved us. OK. First mission complete. Now then..."

Then, Calne turned to Eslina. And,

"Eslina. At any rate, go report this to Ferris-san."

"Understood!"

"Then send out a search party for Ryner Lute as well..."

"I'll report that. I'll send a messenger to His Majesty, who left for Estabul this morning. As for the preparations for the search party, I'll also..."

"Please do."

Calne smiled.

At that, Eslina also became happy. This was it. In order to see this, this was what she worked hard for.

From here on, their duties would increase significantly for a while.

But...

Calne let out a deep breath, before striking his palm.

"All right then, while Sion-san's away, we have to hold down the fort. Aye aye..."

"Oh—!"

Eslina said, holding up a fist.

The two of them were always fired up.

Then, to the dumbfounded Lear, Eslina and Calne with shining eyes—

*"Come on, come on, Lear-san too."*

"Eh? U-Um... if it's an order from my superior... Oh~"

Lear said in a small voice.

Calne and Eslina laughed.

Then Calne said,

"Then, the Great Detective Calne Kaiwal will resume the hunt for the missing persons & a beautiful woman..."

"There's already a beautiful woman right here!"

Eslina shouted that.

"... I guess."

"What!? What's that dissatisfied face for—!?"

But Calne ignored that and spoke to Lear.

"Well, relax, Corporal Lear. Using the authoritative power Sion-san entrusted me with, we'll find Luke-san and the others immediately."

He stuck out his chest proudly.

Without thinking, Eslina smiled at the figure that was trying to look reliable.

Then, Lear seemed to relax as well...

He looked at Calne.

Then he looked at Eslina.

And with a happy, peaceful expression, he said one thing.

"I feel reaaally uneasy."

*"Why—!?"*

With that, the days of the king's absence began.



Again, back in time.

The day having completely faded away, it was nighttime.

Eslina, leaving the area where the nobles resided, rushed over to the Eris house.

Guided by the steward Croselli into the garden...

In the garden was a beautiful woman.

Ferris Eris.

Though she was beautiful under the rays of the sun... Illuminated by the moonlight.. It was if she was a spirit that surpassed even a goddess...

If it were a man, he would certainly be charmed by her beauty. Even she, despite being female, was speechless for a moment.

Calne's face when he'd seen her. Remembering that, she became somewhat disheartened.

*I-I won't lose... but if I'm fighting with someone pretty like this, my chances of winning are...*

But then she looked over this way, and,

"What have you been doing? You're late. Are you a tortoise? A slug? Manservant."

"....."

*M-Maybe I stand a chance...*

For some reason, Eslina changed her mind.

*Well, that's not important right now.*

Timidly, Eslina—

"U-Um... I'm here to report. We know Ryner Lute's whereabouts."

"Hmm."

"The place is in Estabul territory... The western mountain route..."

She began, but the beautiful woman apparently chose not to hear her words to the end.

"Estabul? ... Fu, fufufufufufu. Ryner, you've finally been exposed. Croselli, go. Get me a map of Estabul."

Croselli cheerfully said,

"Yes, Ojousama<sup>[1]</sup>."

Apparently prepared beforehand, he handed her a map.

At that,

"Eh... u-um, I'll be going... I have to prepare a search party today..."

Eslina was ignored.

Ferris's expression was blank; however, she said,

"It's over, Ryner. I'll send your head flying towards the Estabul sky."

After saying such scary words, she began to run off at once.

"Wha..."

She was unbelievably fast.

In the blink of an eye, she disappeared from one's field of vision...

"... I-Is she searching by herself? Surely one person can't..."

But suddenly, to the side, Croselli spoke.

"... My gratitude towards you."

"Eh? Um... what..."

"For locating Ryner-sama. The ojousama had been considerably depressed until then."

He said that.

*Depressed...?*

*Her?*

"....."

*Someone as beautiful as her, as if she were born in a different dimension, surely...*

Eslina, somehow, felt like a fool for being slightly jealous.



The worst always happens when you least expect it.

Ryner had an anguished expression.

"Uu..."

Quietly, he moaned.

He'd left Roland and headed towards Estabul; furthermore, he'd covered a considerable distance. It would take an ordinary person two weeks by foot, slowly moving forward, to reach a village...

That was why, wandering aimlessly, Ryner had covered four weeks' worth of ground.

Taking an afternoon nap here and there... Occasionally sticking to the path,



uncertain if he had anyone pursuing him...

However, there were definitely no traces left.

And as of now, he'd already been staying at an inn for three days.

There were no indications of any pursuers. No, it was possible that he had no such pursuers to begin with.

"....."

*That'd be good...*

Ryner thought.

Remaining on his own, carefree.

Taking afternoon naps whenever he wanted.

But...

Nevertheless, Ryner...

"... Uuu,"

With a suffering expression, he moaned.

Right now, he was in an inn that was relatively large compared to the village size. The cooking was delicious, there were fifteen rooms, and all of them were kept in good condition.

But apart from Ryner, there were only two other people staying there. However, that was a lot, considering that yesterday and the day before, it'd only been Ryner.

One would think that that kind of customer income couldn't possibly be enough...

When he'd asked about that while treating himself to lunch in the dining hall, the landlady in charge of managing the inn said, "That's not quite true. While we may not have many customers right now, there's a special constellation you can only see in the winter here... do you know about it, customer? The Riroka constellation..."

Ryner tilted his head at that.

"Huh? Riroka? Ah~... one that you can only see in the winter... I wonder. In Roland, it's said that there's the Sehrol constellation..."

The landlady looked surprised, and then in a slightly tense voice, spoke.

"Oh, customer, you're from Roland?"

However, Ryner—

"Not exactly. I'm a refugee from Roland."

"Oh, that's a relief."

The landlady laughed.

Why that was such a relief, he didn't understand at all.

More than someone from Roland, she spoke as if a criminal from Roland on the run would be vastly preferable.

This was the present situation between Roland and Estabul.

After a long period of fighting and mutual killing, even the constellation names were different...

If they were to meet, in spite of their quarreling, they were the same human beings in the end.

"It's ridiculous..."

With sleepy eyes, Ryner muttered.

To that, the landlady asked,

"Eh? Did you say something?"

"Not really. Just that the food here is delicious."

The landlady's expression returned to its original polite one, and furthermore, smiled broadly.

"Isn't it? You come from Roland, after all. Isn't the food over there bad? But that the customer is happy as well over the food makes me happy. That's why for each meal, second helpings are free of charge."

To those words.

Ryner frowned again.

"... Uu."

Again, an anguished expression.

The landlady noticed, and,

"Oh, what's wrong?"

"N-No... it's nothing..."

"Your face doesn't say that it's nothing? Does your stomach hurt?"

However, Ryner shook his head.

The problem right now wasn't such a trivial problem like that.

He gently reached towards his pocket.

From there, he took out his wallet. Flimsy, and even if he only touched it from the outside, he knew nothing but air entered it—a lonely wallet.

"... Uuu."

"Like I said, what's the matter?"

A concerned expression.

But in response to that warm expression, he felt even worse.

At any rate...

The lunch price right now... To say nothing of the fact he'd already finished his meal, or even the breakfast charge...

"Ah, geez..."

*I'm an idiot, aren't I?*

*Why didn't I steal any money from Sion's place...* Even if he thought of that now, he was already in Estabul territory..

Ryner clutched his head.

To that, the landlady—

"Hey, are you... really all right...?"

But then, all of a sudden, she turned towards the kitchen and spoke.

"You! Hey, you!"

It was a different "you" than Ryner.

Coming out from the kitchen was, as expected, a man with an unshaven face. He was the landlady's husband. This landlady, her husband... and their daughter—the three of them managed the inn.

Their daughter was at school right now...

Right now, that was insignificant.

Anyhow, how should he deal with the situation?

Method number one.

Stay here for a bit and do some work here to earn money?

However, since work was troublesome—discarded.

Method number two.

Work here only for the meal just now?

However, since work was still troublesome—discarded.

Thus, method number three.

Dine and dash.

"....."

Ryner said nothing.

No, from the beginning, there'd only been one option.

That was why his chest hurt.

From the beginning, he hadn't been willing to pay...

The landlord spoke.

"A-Are you okay..."

The landlady spoke.

"Does your stomach hurt? Oh, no, it must be because I recommended that he eat more even when he was feeling bad... As I thought, three meals was too much!"

He looked at the two of them, who were fussing over him. Really, they were good people.

And then he looked at the number of dishes of finished food before him that he'd eaten.

A mixture of staple food and side dishes, one, two, three, four, five... It became troublesome counting them all, so he stopped.

Anyhow, it was an amount that was unthinkable for someone who had no money...

If he were to eat, even one meal would be considerably costly. Though there were few customers right now, the inn still made a large profit.

Even if Ryner had money to pay with...

"... Auuu."

"Ahhh, do you need to go to the toilet?"

Ryner nodded at those words.

"Y... Yeah. That's right. I just need to use the toilet for a bit."

He could escape through the washroom window...

He'd decided that in his heart.

Surely, it'd be fine.

Even if there were few customers now, this was a tourist attraction. Money was no problem for them. No, on the contrary, even if he stole a bit of money for travel expenses...

He began, but his thoughts were then interrupted.

"Should I call the doctor from the next town over?"

"... N-No, I'm fine..."

*W-Well, let's stop thinking about stealing from this inn, he decided.*

"Can you stand? Are you able to go to the toilet by yourself?"

Immediately at those words, how troublesome it would be to climb out the washroom window, receiving these people's help, and having to escape floated into his mind...

"... No, I don't want to be a bother..."

Something.

There was clearly something he was misunderstanding about human life.

Ryner stood up. Heading towards the toilet, he opened the door. And,

"....."

He narrowed his eyes.

In this, while he couldn't use the toilet on the second floor... the first floor's washroom window's placement was a little odd.

No, it went with the placement of the second floor's. But that was bad, he thought.

The window's placement was too low. He was completely visible to anyone passing by outside the inn.

In spite of that, there were no curtains.

Then you can open a vent—if one were to say that, the fact was that they were locked to prevent dine-and-dash customers like Ryner and so couldn't be opened...

Looking at that.

*Let's see, today's inn expenses are... the breakfast charge I skipped out on, the lunch charge, and I have to add the bill of the broken window, huh?*

He thought about such things.

*As I thought, with all these expenses, I'll have to run away...*

*Yeah. That's right. The innkeepers seem like good people. I'll escape without*

*breaking a window.*

It was when Ryner decided on that.

Outside the window, a shadowed figure appeared.

At that,

"Ah, you don't need to say anything. Everything's completely visible from outside..."

Ryner began, but his words stopped there.

At first, due to the bad angle, he couldn't see the light's reflection, but the silhouette's figure was becoming clear.

Long, pretty blonde hair.

The shadowed figure was continuously looking at him.

An abnormally well-arranged face.

Almond-shaped blue eyes.

Those eyes... were staring straight into Ryner's...

Elegant pink lips moved.

As the window was closed, he couldn't hear anything.

But just from the movements of those lips, Ryner knew what the shadowed figure was saying.

This was what the shadowed figure was saying.

*"I've finally found you, Ryner. I hope you're prepared."*

"N-No way..."

Ryner trembled.

The shadowed figure had an expressionless face. However, Ryner knew. It was a strangely cheerful expression.

But in contrary to that cheerfulness, in a delicate hand, a long sword was held without him noticing before...

"S-Seriously!? You've already taken it out—!?"

Ryner was scared.

There, the lips continued to move...

Furthermore, the expression became increasingly cheerful.

*"Fufufu. The weather today is also good for sending your head flying..."*

However, Ryner didn't wait to the end. Whirling around on his heel, he fled from that place at once...

Immediately.

A sharp sound rang out once.

And,

"Ry~ner~"

An incredibly pretty voice.

The window wasn't opened enough for that, though.

Ryner looked over his shoulder just a little at that.

He looked over his shoulder... and immediately regretted it.

Regarding the inn expenses... the cost of the window repair... to say nothing of the fact that it was necessary to remake the wall.

At that,

"Hey, Ferris! You, breaking..."

Ryner began, but his words only made it that far. The sword...

"U-Uowah!?"

He cried out, trying to dodge, and,

"Dangero..."

A dull sound echoed inside his head. The blunt edge of Ferris's sword struck Ryner's head.

His brain was jostled a bit. It dealt just a bit more damage than usual. His body was sent flying out of the washroom and into the dining hall.

If it were like always, he'd have bent his body slightly to soften the blow...



Four weeks.

After only four weeks of not seeing her, his reactions to Ferris's sword were sluggish...

No... or was it that Ferris was swinging her sword more quickly than usual?

Crashing onto a dining hall table, he toppled over.

Like that, he glared at Ferris, and,

"Y-You—that was a little dangerous just now! Even if it was with the blunt edge, I could've died..."

He began, but Ferris charged towards him. She swung her sword.

"No waaaay!?"

Together with those words, Ryner twisted his body.

Immediately following that, the sword pierced through the area right by Ryner's head, Ferris sat on top of him.

And,

"Die, Ryner,"

Furthermore, she lay her sword to the side. Positioned over Ryner's neck, it was entirely like a guillotine...

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

There was a scream.

The landlady's voice.

Following that was the landlord:

"S-Stop!"

At the end, to that, Ryner...

*Finally, I understand.*

He thought that.

With listless, half-closed eyes,

"... Ah, I get it. You must be another elite meant to kill me."

In that instant.

The sword suddenly stopped. Like a divine miracle, the sword only cut through the surface of Ryner's neck.

Only a little blood oozed out. It hurt faintly.

But,

"....."

Ferris said nothing.

"....."

Ryner, with tired eyes, also didn't say anything.

Behind them, the landlady and landlord spoke in flustered voices.

"M-Murderer... Y-You... Somebody..."



"O-Oh... hold on, woman. I, to you..."

They began, but Ferris said one thing.

"Outsiders—be quiet.

At that, the two—

"... Outsiders?"

"... Outsiders..."

They shared a glance, before looking at Ryner and Ferris again.

At the unsightly Ryner, and Ferris who was on top of him...

In that moment, for some reason, the two's voices synchronized.

*"Hahaa... I see."*

"W-What!? You guys are getting the wrong idea here!?"

But the landlady, in a *"you don't need to say anything"* tone, said,

"Noo, it's good to be young... somehow, that passion jumped out at me..."

"Haa!? What are you two..."

However, the landlord, in a *"what a troubled guy"* sort of way, smiled wryly, and, "Well, brother. The resourcefulness of a man who fools around... You shouldn't make girls cry."

"Like I said, just hold o... Hey, Ferris, you say something."

He tried...

"....."

Ferris, staring intently at Ryner, said nothing.

At that, the landlady—

"It's hot, isn't it... ah, yes, yes. It's enough already. It's been a while since you've met, hasn't it? You can use this dining hall. Just clean up afterwards..."

At such words,

"Ehhhhh!? W-What!? Why is this happening!? Wait... that's why..."

Ryner began, but the two, as if having seen something good, made a somewhat satisfied face and left.

In response, Ryner spoke in an astounded voice.

"... He~y."

However, for some reason, it was as if they were off in their own world, where nothing could reach them.

Like that, Ryner sighed.

And then his eyes turned to the window on the opposite of the dining hall. Looking outside the window... There were lands overflowing with nature.

There were fields... with fresh crops yet to be fully grown...

It was a carefree afternoon that, in the rural areas, was an ideal time to take a nap.

*Now then, if I were to go take a nap right now somewhere, that'd be the best, etc.* were the thoughts that were going through his head...

However, a voice descended from the above.

Ryner looked up.

"... An elite meant to kill you...? What do you mean?"

Ryner frowned at that, and,

"No, before that, your hair's getting in my face, so would you mind moving off a little?"

Ferris, being strangely obedient, moved away. Well, the reason for that was presumably to go back to the original conversation...

Ryner stood up, and, looking at the knocked over tableware and table, grimaced.

"You... Do you have the money to reimburse them for all that?"

"That's not what I came here to talk about."

Immediately reply.

Ryner looked at Ferris, and then immediately looked outside.

Because of the pain in her eyes as she glared at Ryner.

"I'll ask you one more time. If you don't answer me properly, your head will be sent flying next..."

"... That'd be just a bit problematic, huh? If I dirtied the dining hall with blood, I don't think I'd be able to face that couple..."

His tone was disregarding everything.

Ferris spoke.

"That I'm... an elite meant to kill you—what did you mean by that?"

"....."

In response, while trying to avoid meeting her eyes as much as possible, Ryner gave her a side glance to confirm her state.

In her hand, she held her sword, as if to send his head flying at any moment.

Her sword withdrawn. If there was something she didn't like, she'd immediately withdraw her sword.

And she'd hit Ryner.

For a long time, during the journey with her, he'd been hit many times...

Remembering that, he trembled.

He trembled... However, that sword didn't send his head flying.

Ryner... understood that.

No, he saw.

When his cursed eyes went berserk, within his blurry consciousness.

Unlike his usual self, he began to rain down death and destruction.

Her sword, in its sheathe.

She was always swinging her sword around meaninglessly, but at that time, she'd kept it in its sheathe...

In other words, the opposite of her typical self.

Not doing the one thing he wished for.

Even though Ryner cried out *"Run away"* in his heart, she didn't run away at all.

Instead, with the same painful, sharp look that she gave him now, she said this.

*"Hey, Ryner... You wanted to advance forward, didn't you? You didn't like being called a monster, did you? You thought to yourself that you were sick of killing people, didn't you? I've already evaded your attack five times. But I won't dodge the next. You can decide the rest. I don't consider you a monster.*

*Got that? You're not a monster.*

*You are my partner, my manservant, and my tea-drinking companion. You're no monster. Can you hear me? Ryner."*

*I hear you.*

*But, if I try to—if I try to kill you, what do you intend to do?*

At that time, Ferris had said,

*"Can you hear me, Ryner?"*

*I hear you, Ferris.*

*That's why...*

*Isn't that why I'm moving forward?*

But his path alone wouldn't cross with Ferris's.

His path alone wouldn't cross with Sion's or the other's.

That was the only thing.

To those who stayed by his side...

Because he would kill those important to him.

Ferris said again,

*"What did you mean, I'm an elite meant to kill you?"*

Ryner smiled wryly at that, and,

*"Sorry. It was a misunderstanding. Forget about it."*

"Do you think that answer..."

Ryner interrupted her.

Not meeting Ferris's eyes.

Staring at the scenery outside,

"I know better than anyone that you wouldn't kill me."

"....."

Ferris stopped talking.

With that, she was finally satisfied...

"I have one more thing I want to ask you."

It seemed she wasn't satisfied...

"This suuucks."

Ryner ran a hand through his bedhead hair.

But ignoring his words, she asked,

"What did Lucile say to you?"

Ryner shook his head at that.

"Nothing."

However, Ferris again—

"What did he say?"

"Like I said, no—thing."

"... What did he say?"

"You're stubborn, huh? He didn't say anything..."

Ferris interrupted Ryner's words and continued.

"Lucile told me that he warned you not to make any passes at his younger sister."

At those words, what Lucile said back then again turned around in his mind.

*"What manner of unfulfillable dreams... has such a hideous monster seen?"*



Entirely right.

Ryner smiled wryly and spoke.

"He's quite the caring brother, huh?"

However, Ferris didn't respond to that, and instead,

"Was the reason you ran off because of that?"

"That's not it."

Ryner again shook his head.

"Because my brother gave you a warning, you ran away?"

"... Huh? Ah... Well, if it were that kind of warning, anybody would run away at once just because of that... but that's not it."

But even though he said that wasn't it, Ferris went on.

"Attacking women and children night after night, faced with desperate pleas from hundreds of billions of guardians, 'P-Please, enough... not my daughter... not my daughteeeeeeer!'

They say, and while they beg,

'Mwahahahahaha, who could stop me!? All women and children should fall prostrate before me, the terrifying, perverted overlord Ryner Lute!'

Etc., etc. You push the limits of human decency, and then suddenly, because of one little warning from my older brother, you turn tail and flee in disgrace? Have you no pride as an overlord!?"

To such a declaration.

"... I don't want that kind of pride. Besides that, I'm pretty sure there aren't hundreds of billions of guardians in the world—well, that aside... I think just being warned by that guy is enough,"

Ryner said with an astounded expression.

However, even though Ferris had just been joking, she continued to stare at Ryner with serious eyes.

Ryner, to that—

"... Could it be that you're actually really angry right now?"

"I'm angry."

It was an immediate reply.

She glared at Ryner further sharply, and,

"... That day, I'd prepared fourteen, fully loaded backpacks of dango."

To that,

"Ah... I see. Right. Still, fourteen packs... One person couldn't carry all those..."

After saying that, he pictured it.

In front of the dango shop.

Ferris, carrying fully loaded backpacks.

With a blank expression, humming to herself.

However, Ryner wasn't coming.

She was humming at the start, but eventually, she stopped. Alone, surrounded by backpacks that she wasn't supposed to carry by herself...

A lonely figure.

That lonely figure... immediately withdrawing her sword, shouting "*I'll execute him!*" as she ran, angry...

As that image clearly appeared in his mind,

"Y-You're angry... there's no mistake..."

Ryner trembled.

Ferris then nodded.

"Mm-hmm. I hope you're ready for what's coming."

"L-Let's not go that far? Hey, you... that's why, why is your sword..."

Ryner began, but as he spoke, a voice came from the inn entrance.

"Hello. May I use the dining hall?"

A male voice. A customer?

Following that, the landlady spoke in a frantic voice.

"Ah, Zepahd-san, welcome. But my apologies. Today the dining hall is closed."

"Eh? Why is that?"

"Eh? Uuum, thaats... a valued customer is in the middle of something."

"In the middle of something? That's too bad. Truth be told, my wife went back to her parents' home this morning, so nobody's preparing meals there."

"Ohh? Did you get into a fight?"

"No, no, that's not... ah..."

*Gokyu.*

Suddenly, there was the sound of something breaking there.

"Eh... wha... Zepahd-san? Just... ah..."

*Gokyu.*

Their conversation ended with that.

The landlady and the customer suddenly became quiet. Even though they were in the middle of their conversation...

At that, Ryner—

"What was that?"

As Ryner turned around with a puzzled expression, there was the sound of something gushing out.

It was a familiar sound to Ryner.

But that...

"... Ryner,"

Ferris then said.

"Hmm?"

He looked at her. Her eyes were directed towards outside the window.

Following her gaze, he looked outside the window.

Outside the window was, just as it was before, the peaceful scene of the rural lands.

However, Ryner didn't miss it.

On the unpaved dirt path, there were red streaks of bodily fluids streaming...

"... Blood?"

Then, over there, the landlord's voice. A deep, gentle voice. It descended from the second floor...

"Sorry about that, Zepahd-san. But if we prepare a bento... oh... ah..."

*Gokyu.*

With that, it ended.

His words ended with that.

But at that, Ryner—

"H-Hey, Ferris..."

"I know!"

From the door, a voice spoke.

"Ah, this is also different. How strange."

Refined in some respects, a male voice.

"Even though we were to meet here. Where, I wonder?"

The dining hall's door knob started to move.

"Here?"

Slowly, slowly the door opened.

In response, Ryner's body became tense.

He didn't understand what was happening at all.

But...

The door opened.

From the crack, a man's face appeared.

A young man.

Black hair, black clothing—everything down to his shoes was black. Though everything was black, the floor...

Ryner—

"... You bastard..."

Ryner scowled.

The floor was bright red.

With blood...

Furthermore, around the edges of his mouth, like a child sampling strawberry candy, was blood...

"... You bastard.. what did you..."

In response, the man looked at Ryner and then at Ferris.

"Hmm? Which one?"

At the same time.

There was the sound of something crawling across the ground. The man was holding something and dragging it across the floor.

Ryner looked at that.

Looking at that...

"... Ah—!?"

He couldn't help but cry out.

Behind him, Ferris also moaned.

What the man was holding was black hair. A woman's... Holding onto the bloody hair of a woman, he pulled her along...

It was the landlady's...

Noticing Ryner's gaze, the man spoke in a cheerful voice.

"Ah, this? Though the woman's meat was soft, it didn't provide much power, nor was it particularly delicious."

He dropped the woman's head onto the floor with a thud.

And he stared at Ryner and Ferris happily...

"Looking at you two, I lose the feeling as if I've devoured cheap ingredients. Is it all right if I feed?"

Saying such things...

"W-What the hell is this guy..."

Ryner said, feeling as if he were about to vomit.

Following was Ferris, who spoke in a somewhat tight voice...

"... It seems like he exceeds even you in the sex fiend department... but..."

He understood what Ferris was trying to say.

But... he was strong.

More than that, overwhelmingly so.

He could tell just by looking. Though he moved casually, he left no openings.

No, there were openings, but they all looked to be traps...

It was that manner of movement.

He was stronger than them.

Looking at that, he understood immediately. It was the same as when he met Lucile—a despairing difference in power...

Nevertheless.

Then, the man spoke.

"You two seem strong... With just that delicious fragrance alone... it makes me painfully hungry. As I thought, there was no mistake in Lafra's words. It's surely one of you.

Shall I find out which one?"

Saying that, he slowly stepped forward.

He looked at them.

At that, Ryner said,

"Don't mo..."

"What?"

In the next instant.

The man's hand appeared before Ryner's eyes.

"Uo—!?"

Ryner immediately bent his body in order to dodge.

The hand moved to grab Ryner's head.

Ryner rolled across the ground once.

Following that, Ferris slashed at the man with her sword as a feint...

However, the man took a step back, easily evading Ferris's sword.

Unbelievable reaction speed.

Furthermore, his body didn't tense up at all. When moving. When using one's strength. One's muscles become stiff.

That was why, when up against ordinary opponents, by reading the other party's muscle movements, they could predict their next move.

Despite this man's movements, he wasn't tense, as he suddenly moved at top speed...

To that, Ryner—

"Fast... Damn it."

By his side, Ferris readied her sword.

"However, it's not impossible to react..."

"I guess. Let's do it."

Ryner nodded.

At that, the man made a slightly surprised face, and,

"You two have sharp eyes. It's hard to believe you're human."

At those words, Ryner glared at the man.

"You're the one who's moving in a way that's inhuman."

He spat out those words.

But in response, the man stared in puzzlement, tilting his head to one side as he spoke.

"... Eh? Do I look human to you?"

"Ah? What?"

But the man ignored that.

"... Then, you're human, are you? If so, then I wonder about the one with blonde hair there?"

"Ahh!? I don't get what you're saying. There must be something wrong with your head..."

Regarding that, Ferris spoke.

"But he's strong. There's something bad about him."

"Can we beat him?"

"I'll be depending on you."

"Then it'll be fine."

A smile arose in Ryner's face.

The enemy was unbelievably strong. But up until now, he'd fought against plenty of other monster-like opponents together with Ferris.

Enemies who possessed great power and used Heroes' Relics...

When they'd fought against such opponents, they'd already decided on the strategy for the two of them.

Ferris would provide support...

"Nn—"

With that, she lunged ahead of Ryner.

She swung her sword.

Ryner was always surprised by her speed.



He understood why the man thought it was hard to believe that she was human. But even with that, the man easily evaded the sword.

He was an outrageous guy.

In a straightforward fight, it was possible they couldn't win.

But behind them, Ryner was already taking action.

He chanted an acceleration spell.

Drawing letters of light in the air, he began to chant the spell he'd stolen from the previous Estabul Magic Knights with his unique eyes... the **Alpha Stigma**.

"I OFFER THE CONTRACTED WORDS, LETTING THE SLUMBERING MALICIOUS SPIRIT DWELL WITHIN!"

He immediately completed the spell...

In that instant.

Ryner's body, glowing faintly, accelerated.

It was almost equivalent to Ferris's speed.

At that, the man—

"Magic?"

But Ryner didn't answer.

Kicking off the ground and the walls as well, he went around the man at once...

He'd already cast one spell.

With accelerated movements, he completed a magic circle in the blink of an eye...

Light was being stolen by the magic circle.

The man dodged Ferris's sword...

However, because of that, he lost his posture.

There...

"It's over.

WHAT I SEEK IS THUNDER >>> IZUCHI!"

Lightning surged.

There was no time to dodge whatsoever.

The lightning spell moved to pierce the man's chest...

Ryner saw it.

The man smiled.

His eyes opened wide.

And within their centers, a strange pattern arose.

Like the vermillion five-star pentacle in Ryner's eyes, a carved curse.

But the shape was different.

What arose in this man's eyes was...

A cross pattern.

As if dividing his black eyes, a vermillion cross pattern arose...



The man spoke.

"I consume..."

Immediately.

The flash of lightning... No, even the light accelerating Ryner's body was absorbed by the man's vermillion pattern.

"Wha...!?"

The magic was forcibly cancelled, and upon without control of his accelerated body, Ryner lost his balance.

He fell onto the ground...

However, he didn't remove his eyes.

From the figure of the man who absorbed the light.

Ferris swung her sword.

But the man didn't react to that at all. Looking as if he were enjoying himself with a pleased expression, his body bent back...

"Ah... Ahh... Amazing... What amazing power..."

The sword connected.

Just before that.

The man murmured,

"... and unleash."

Then, Ryner lost sight of the man.

By the time he realized it, one hand had grabbed his face and was pressing him against the dining hall wall.

By his side... as was expected, Ferris too was being pushed against the wall...

Ferris moaned.

"... Monster."

But the man stared at Ferris... Peering into her eyes, he looked at her... and then laughed cheerfully.

"That surely must be what the cows or pigs that you feed on daily think when they look at you. When they look up at their predator... fear... and resignation..."

Then he turned to Ryner.

To Ryner's eyes.

Peering with those eyes in which the vermillion cross pattern floated...

He nodded in satisfaction.

"I've finally found you. A five-star pentacle, floating lightly... in other words, the **Alpha Stigma**?"

"Y-You..."

But the man continued on indifferently.

"I am Tiir Rumibul. You should understand by seeing... I'm a bearer of the God's Eyes, **Iino Doue**. I've come here for you."

He said such words.

But at something so sudden, his mind was in chaos.

**Iino Doue** bearer?

Was he perhaps referring to the vermillion cross pattern in his eyes?

That...

"God's Eyes..."

Then Ferris spoke.

"What this guy is saying... Gua..."

Tiir applied more force. To that extent, Ferris let out a moan and became quiet.

Ryner, in response—

"H-Hey!"

"It's all right. I won't kill her yet. I have to confirm something first... However, I see. You, here in the southern continent, don't understand such words... Then,

in this country, you scorn and call your eyes 'Cursed Eyes?' "

Saying such things...

However, he understood Ferris's words.

Right now, under these circumstances, this wasn't the place to be discussing things with this kind of guy.

Despite that.

Despite that, his mind started to go over what this man had said.

This man knew what he didn't know about himself.

In addition to that, regarding his eyes...

Regarding his eyes that he'd always wanted to know about...

Cursed Eyes... that term didn't originate in Roland.

Back when Gastark had forcibly caused his eyes to go berserk, they'd been called that...

Back then, that was definitely what they said.

*"I'd thought that before going berserk, the **Alpha Stigma**'s level wasn't very high among the Cursed Eyes..."*

From those words...

"... Cursed Eyes... That's what my eyes are?"

However, at those words, Tiir said softly,

"That's what humans use as words of contempt. The accurate term is God's Eyes."

"No, it doesn't really matter what you call them... then, there are other types of these 'God's Eyes' besides the **Alpha Stigma**?"

Tiir let out a troubled-sounding sigh...

"Ah... so it's necessary to explain from there... I'd heard that there were few of us in the south who possessed God's Eyes, and so far... Well, now isn't the best time to explain. Let's go."

"Ha? To where?"

"To where our friends are. I've come all the way here just for you."

At that, Ryner again didn't understand.

*Friends? Huh? Does he mean where other Cursed Eye bearers are gathered?*

*No, more importantly... he came here for me?*

Staring at Tiir, Ryner spoke.

"I don't get it. You say you came here for me, but how did you know where I was?"

Again, Tiir let out a sigh as if he didn't want to listen to any nonsense, and,

"That's why those eyes... No, it's fine already. Besides, afterwards..."

However, Ryner interrupted.

"One thing. There's still one thing I want to ask."

"What is it?"

Regarding that, Ryner looked to the entrance of the dining hall. The floor that had become a sea of blood...

Ryner spoke.

"Why did you kill the inn's family...?"

Then he glared sharply at Tiir.

However, looking at Ryner's face, Tiir let out another deep sigh.

"Ah... the lower level eyes are always difficult because of this. Particularly the **Alpha Stigma**... If it were the **Will Heim**, it wouldn't take this much time..."

"Ah? Will... What?"

But Tiir made a bewildered face and looked at Ferris...

"Then, could it be that this is also... someone important to you?"

He raised that question; however, before Ryner could answer, Tiir only had to look at his expression before again letting out a sigh.

"Hmm. Even though it's not wise for those with the **Alpha Stigma** and the risk

of going berserk to empathize with livestock who die so easily..."

He began, but then Ferris spoke.

"Cut the useless chatter. Get ready."

*Get ready?*

Reflexively, at those sudden words,

*For what?*

Just as he was about to ask that...

Something was going on outside the window.

And, smashing through the window, was an arrow that pierced through Tiir's shoulder...

"Mu..."

Like that, taking advantage of his distracted state, Ferris freed herself.

"Hide yourself. Arrows are coming."

"Eh? Hey, wait... from where..."

Ryner said, but when he looked behind, arrows filled his field of vision.

Outside the window were countless soldiers dressed in the uniform of Roland's army...

Leading them was...

White hair. Golden eyes. A face that was strangely brimming with confidence, and one he knew very well.

"S-Sion!?"

But as he was exclaiming that, he was forcibly pulled away from behind. Ferris had grabbed Ryner's hair and was dragging him along...

At that, Tiir—

"Trying to esca..."

But his words only made it that far.

Ferris threw her sword.



Though Tiir promptly dodged the sword that was thrown with incredible speed...

"Guh..."

One by one, arrows struck Tiir's legs, arms, and back.

One arrow.

"Uu..."

Two arrows.

"Damn you..."

Ten arrows...

"....."

Seeing up until that point, Ryner and Ferris charged out of the dining hall. Like that, they rushed towards the washroom, going through the wall that Ferris had destroyed earlier...

Towards the outside.

In the once empty fields, a large Roland army, holding bows, was deployed, surrounding the inn...

It was entirely as if they were at war.

From within, Sion's voice resounded.

"Don't use magic, no matter what! It seems that somehow, the opponent absorbs magic! No matter the situation, use only your bows and swords!"

At that, Ryner...

"Bows?"

Without thinking, he said that.

According to Ryner's memories, as magic's precision was greater than bows, bows had been replaced by magic, and so hadn't bows been out of use for over a hundred years?

Of course, it seemed that there were countries who used assigned bows for magic...

At least, as far as Ryner knew, Roland no longer used bows in war. In other words, bows weren't being manufactured...

Despite that, right now, wherever Ryner looked, there were countless soldiers with a bow in hand.

Then, Sion casually moved over to where he was...

Staring at Ryner, he spoke.

"Hey, runaway boy. Are you all right?"

At that...

"Runaway... Are you saying I'm a little kid?"

However, this time, it was Ferris by his side who spoke.

"You're a little kid."

Furthermore, Sion too—

"Aren't you? Come now, what made you so unhappy that you ran away from home? Your dad is rich, after all. I can buy you whatever you want? Just say the word?"

They were completely making fun of him.

In response, Ryner wearily said,

"... For some reason, right now, I reaaally, seriously want to run away from home..."

He muttered that.

Then,

"Hey, Sion! What are you doing?"

From behind Sion, a red-haired man spoke. Sharp eyes and a tight body. He was missing his right arm, but in spite of that, he seemed strong.

That man—

"Go check to see if that monster's dead."

He said.

Monster...

Ryner looked at the man.

But then Sion shook his head.

"That won't do, Claugh. We can't approach the inn. Didn't I say so in the beginning? We have to deal with him using bows."

"But... that guy might be using a trick..."

Sion interrupted.

"That's no good. This isn't for revenge. Forget about your fallen allies and your arm. On top of that, if you keep moving around, you won't recover. If I lose you here..."

"My injury's..."

"Be quiet. I don't intend to sacrifice anyone here. Return to your station. Your place is... Ah, geez, enough. Shuss! Take Claugh away!"

In response, a young soldier appeared, and,

"Understood!"

"Guh... Shuss, you bastard..."

The red-haired man called Claugh said and resisted, to which Sion—

"... Are you refusing to listen to me in front of the other soldiers?"

At those words.

"Damn..."

The red-haired man scowled.

"P-Pardon us... Your Majesty."

Taken away by the young soldier, they withdrew from the area.

Ryner looked at Sion, whom he'd never really seen as king...

He murmured in a quiet voice,

"Hey, hey, actually doing king-ish things..."

Then from beside him, Ferris said,

"No, it's surely only a pretense, don't you see? He's only trying to look good before us."

"Yeah~ ... Sion's like that. Back in the academy, he'd frantically put on that act..."

At such a conversation, Sion made an astounded face.

"... No, you guys... well, at least you're talking quietly enough so that my subordinates can't hear, huh?"

Ferris spoke.

"Thank us."

Ryner nodded in an exaggerated manner.

"Right, right. Give us your thanks."

At that, Sion...

"This isn't the place to be saying that, you know..."

Sion said, turning to the inn with a somber expression.

"If the arrows didn't work as well as I'd hoped... this isn't too good..."

He began, but then all of a sudden, a black shape was thrown into the sky, and then landed at Sion's feet with a thud.

Sion looked down at it...

"... This isn't too good, huh?"

He frowned.

What had fallen was a corpse.

Ryner recognized that corpse's face. It was another customer staying at the inn.

However, now, the body was dealt with in a cruel manner. As if it'd been torn to shreds and devoured by a beast, half his body was missing...

Then, over there, a voice resounded.

"Arrows... arrows... Furthermore, they're not imbued with magic; they're just

ordinary arrows... Well done. You understand my weakness well. Correct. If there hadn't been food on the second floor, I would've died..."

Ryner looked to the source of the voice.

On the second floor of the inn.

Crouching on the balcony railing was Tiir. He was holding pieces of what he'd called food.

Sion looked up at that.

"I see. Not only magic, but he absorbs what he devours from humans as well... and his injuries also heal, then? That's why he could so calmly charge into an army like that. But he can't absorb the arrows or trees... What he devours is what magic scholars call [seirei](#)... possibly the currents? However, he can't absorb them directly from the air. What's gathered by someone and fired in a spell... and he directly absorbs the power within humans... is that about right? In other words, as long as we don't release any magic, you won't come close... You can't do a thing."

In an expression full of confidence, he said that all that once.

But opposite to that expression were the soldiers behind him, whose focus was elsewhere.

They were waiting for the reaction of their opponent, after listening to that hypothesis. And whether it was correct or incorrect... They were waiting to confirm that before deciding what to do.

If Tiir seemed to laugh at Sion's words, it would cause the soldiers to falter and retreat.

However, Tiir didn't laugh. His eyes widened slightly in surprise. His eyes with the vermillion cross pattern that floated in them.

And,

"... How nice. Your brain tissue seems dreadfully delicious. It exists once in a while, doesn't it? This sort of human."

"Hoh. Then, I'm correct."

"Indeed. About seventy percent of it, I'd say."

"Do you wish to devour me?"

"I do."

However, a broad grin spread across Sion's face.

"But you won't be able to."

He raised in his hands.

"Ready your bows!"

Together with his voice and the sound of the command, the soldiers all readied their bows at once.

And Sion spoke.

"I'll ask once. Do you have any intention of surrendering?"

"None."

"Then you'll die here."

But with a calm expression, Tiir shrugged, and,

"Before that, would it be all right if I pointed out a few mistakes you made?"

"No. I refuse."

However, Tiir then finally laughed at his words.

His expression truly was calm.

Due to that reaction, Sion didn't attack.

Aside from what was correct, the remaining thirty percent...

Because of that unease... he didn't attack.

If he had unknown abilities... If they moved carelessly, they would die. Furthermore, there was the fact that the soldiers were all entrusting their lives to Sion.

Confirming that, Tiir began to explain.

"The first mistake in your hypothesis... Though it takes a bit more time, I can devour power directly from the air.

As my eyes unconsciously absorb this power, I am incapable of properly creating magic organizations and using magic myself...

Regarding that, I can't obtain enough without devouring magic and humans...

Nevertheless, as, throughout this entire discussion, I've continuously been devouring, at this distance... I can devour you before the arrows even reach me."

However, glaring sharply at Tiir, Sion spoke.

"Ha—what clever talk. If you could, why wouldn't you do that immediately?"

But unsurprisingly, Tiir smiled cheerfully...

"That... is your second mistake. The fact that I haven't devoured you isn't because I'm incapable of doing so."

"Then, do you plan on telling me your reasons?"

Over there.

Tiir gently pointed.

In this direction.

He pointed at Ryner, and for some reason, spoke in a loud voice...

"As long as he's watching, if I were to devour you, my friend, the **Alpha Stigma** bearer there, would go berserk."

He raised his voice loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Sion scowled at that.

"... Not good."

But it was already too late.

The state of affairs couldn't be settled.

The influence of Tiir's voice made its way to the soldiers in the back.

The soldiers began to cause a commotion.

"... Friend?"

"An **Alpha Stigma** bearer..."

"That guy..."

"That guy's also..."

He'd already heard and gotten used to the rest of those words, again and again.

*"That guy's also... a monster."*

Sion cried out.

"Silence—!"

With that, the commotion disappeared. They were a considerably well-trained army.

But...

Tiir spoke. To Ryner:

"Did you see that? Those are humans. You can't live in harmony with them. Nevertheless, if that human is important to you, I won't kill him. But you should come to my side..."

Then Sion—

"Don't be ridiculous! Ryner—Ryner isn't like you. Not like you, a..."

He began, but then Tiir smiled again.

As if waiting for those words, he smiled.

And,

"Like me, a what? Did you mean to say... not like me, a **monster**?"

"Uu..."

Sion moaned.

But Tiir went on.

"Ryner, is it? All right, Ryner. Come along with me. This place doesn't suit you."



At that.

"....."

Ryner didn't reply. Saying nothing, he stared fixatedly at Tiir's face...

No, rather, he was staring into empty space.

Ferris spoke.

"Hey, Ryner. There's no need to listen to what he says."

"....."

Tiir continued.

"Being scorned as a monster... despised as taboo... Is it truly necessary to remain exposed to such things? Don't you have something to protect?"

He gently held out his hand, and,

"Come with me."

Then, he pointed to his own eyes.

"Fire magic at my eyes. If you do, I could take you along, Ryner, and leave this place..."

But then,

"Be quiet! Ryner, don't fire any magic!"

Sion shouted.

However.

As expected, a calm smile arose in Tiir's face.

And,

"Ryner will fire. That's the final mistake in your hypothesis.

None of you...

None of you understand the darkness in our hearts, we who are constantly betrayed.

Isn't that right?

Ryner."

At those words.

Sion and Ferris looked at Ryner.

His expression...

Those two, looking at his expression, were speechless.

What expression he was making then... Ryner didn't know.

But looking at those two's expressions, he understood.

What kind of face he was making.

That was why Ryner tried to smile.

He tried.

But he couldn't do it...

"Neither of you... Neither of you are to blame. I liked you both."

In response, Ferris spoke.

Glaring at Ryner, she said,

"I didn't follow you here to hear such words."

Furthermore, Sion—

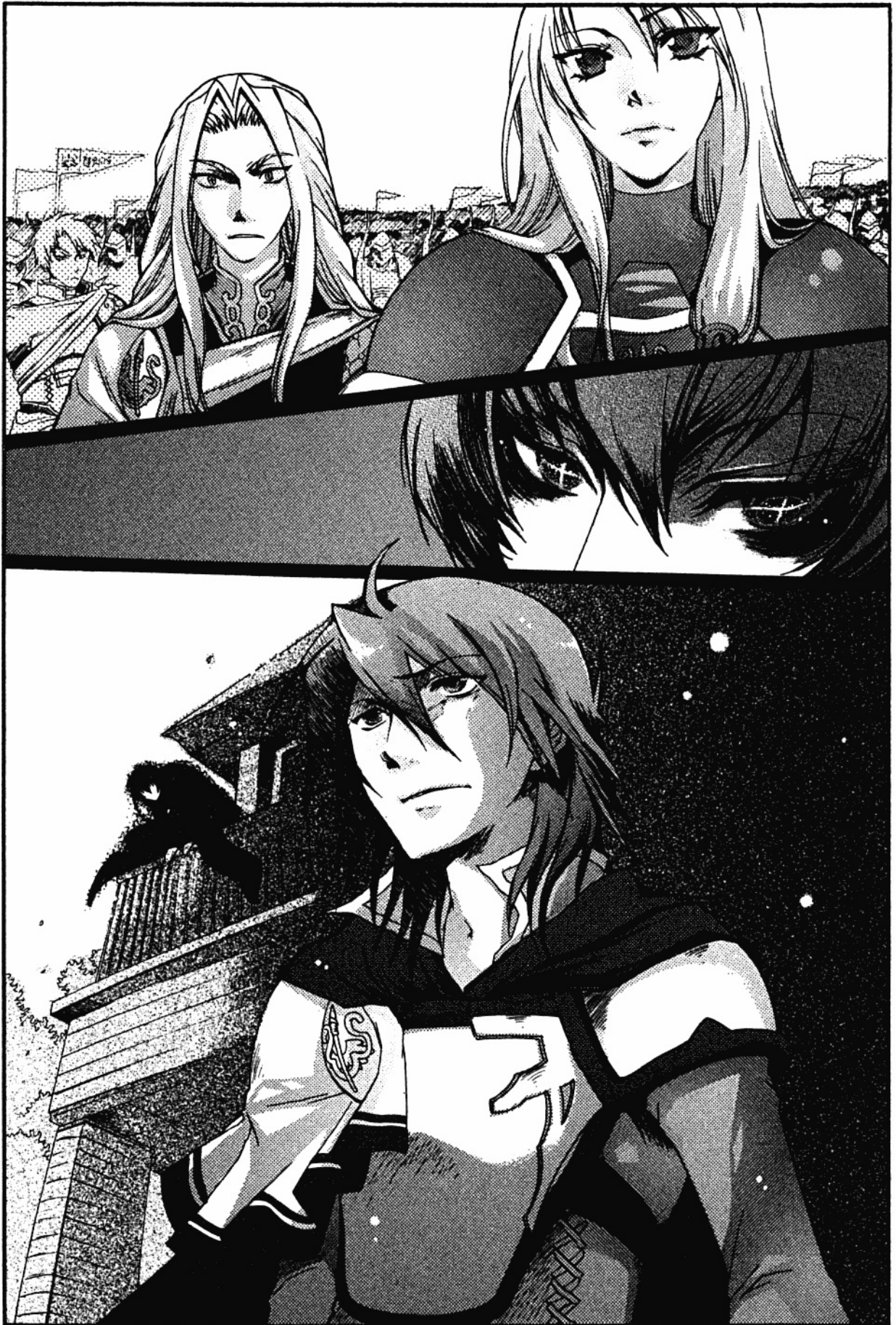
"Don't go. You..."

But Ryner interrupted him.

"I won't cause any more trouble for you. It must be tough, looking after a monster who could go berserk at any moment."

"When did I ever..."

He began, but then.



"You gave Luke Stokkart the duty..."

Immediately, Sion's expression changed.

"....."

That was his answer.

With that, nothing more needed to be asked.

The duty Sion gave Luke Stokkart.

That was—

There, upon realizing it, Ferris murmured,

"... the duty, as an elite, to kill you."

For the monster, Ryner...

To erase him.

Tiir laughed. Cheerfully, he laughed.

At that, Sion...

"... That's not it."

He let loose a pained voice...

But he'd said that Sion wasn't to blame.

*So you...*

*So you don't have to make that kind of pained expression.*

He wanted to say that.

*I'm the one to blame.*

*I make him suffer just by being here.*

*But it's over now.*

*There's no more need to suffer.*

"....."

Ryner began to draw a magic circle of light in the air.

"WHAT I SEEK IS THUNDER >>>..."

Sion's expression curved further at that, before he looked up at Tiir...

"D-Don't! You can't... You can't go, no matter what. All troops... All troops, fire arrows—! Kill him! Kill that monster—!"

With that command...

All arrows fired at once.

Covering one's entire field of vision was a flood of arrows...

However, even so, Tiir was smiling.

He held his hand out towards Ryner...

"Do it."

Sion looked in Ryner's direction.

"Stop, Ryner!"

He cried out, in a voice as if he were about to cry.

However, Ryner, in response—

"Sorry."

Light gathered in the center of his magic circle...

"IZUCHI."

In an instant, it burned through several arrows and reached the second floor of the inn.

With a triumphant smile, Tiir opened his eyes wide.

"I consume power..."

He absorbed Ryner's magic.

"... and unleash it—"

In the next moment, he was standing in front of Ryner.

With a cheerful, smiling face,

"Now, let's go. Our friends are waiting."

It happened so quickly that it couldn't be followed at all.

To the soldiers... No, perhaps to even Sion, it looked like this. That after being hit by the arrows, Tiir died... That.

The only ones who could react were Ryner and Ferris.

Ferris moved.

"I won't let you."

Her hand reached out...

But.

Ryner brushed that hand away.

Ferris looked shocked at that.

Ryner gazed at that face one more time.

He tried to smile one more time...

Tiir held onto Ryner.

Like that, with amazing force, he jumped.

In an instant.

All at once, Ferris's figure could no longer be seen.

"... See you, Ferris."

In the end, again, he couldn't pull off a smile.



And Ryner disappeared from that place.

## Translator's Notes

1. [↑](#) Ojousama is a respectful term used for a daughter of a high-class family.

# Prologue 2: -still, that she may smile one day

I moved quickly.  
In order to approach it, I moved quickly.  
A dream that I wanted to seize.  
Happiness that I wanted to get a hold of.  
But why did I want to get a hold of it?  
Why did I want this?  
I can't remember.  
Even though I sacrificed so much for that dream.  
I can't remember.  
Even though I killed so many for that dream.  
I advanced too far.  
Even if I look back to the past, I can't remember anything, as I advanced too far.



By the time he realized it, Ryner had vanished.  
"....."  
Sion didn't see it.  
No, surely no one saw it.  
But he understood what had happened here.  
Because he understood.



"....."

His breathing was...

Sion lifted his face.

On that face, a smile brimming with confidence arose.

A king's face.

He turned to the soldiers, bows still in place, and spoke.

"The menace has fled. It's our victory!"

His breathing was...

The soldiers all cheered at once.

Though they didn't understand what had happened, if their king said they won, then it was their victory.

It looked as if the enemy had been terminated in the storm of arrows. To most of the soldiers, the enemy...

It would seem like they defeated that monster.

The soldier's cheering soon turned into an ovation for Sion.

Their benevolent ruler.

Hero King.

Everyone called him that.

There, Ferris looked at Sion.

"... King... huh?"

Saying only that, she turned to behind him.

And she started to walk away.

Sion, at that...

"... Hey, Ferris. I..."

However,

"What Ryner said was right. You aren't to blame."

"No, that's..."

He was interrupted...

"What you wanted to protect..."

At that point, her voice disappeared.

Lost amidst the voices that praised the king, it disappeared.

Before long, she could no longer be seen amidst the soldiers.

And nobody criticized him.

Sion turned towards Ferris, who'd already disappeared, and murmured.

"... 'If that's the case, you aren't at fault?' "

*That's obvious, isn't it?*

He thought that.

*I'm the king.*

*Listen to these voices.*

*Listen to these voices praising me.*

*Nobody is criticizing me.*

*I didn't make a mistake.*

*Because I'm the perfect king.*

*As for Ryner... That was necessary, after all.*

*Only that.*

*Who could criticize me for that?*

*Who would criticize me for that?*

At that, he remembered the words Ferris said.

And he remembered the expression Ryner had at the end.

A face that looked as if it were about to cry, begging for forgiveness.

*Even though I was the one who hurt him...*

*Nobody...*

*Nobody, to me...*

"... I can't... seem to breathe..."

He said in a voice as if he were going to be sick, but it didn't reach anyone.

It was lost in the voices of praise that buzzed in Sion's ears.

However, as that became too loud, the feeling grew further away.

Coming closer, that was...



Ten days later.



Ferris had already returned to Roland.

As usual, in the morning.

As usual, she was chatting with the shopkeeper in front of the Wynnit dango shop.

Every morning, Ferris would chat with the shopkeeper and sample some food as her daily routine before her journey.

Thus, upon returning to Roland, that was unsurprisingly her normal morning.

All of it truly was typical.

Before her journey, each day after day was the same.

Nothing changed.

There was no lack of anything.

To Ferris, who was sampling dango, the shopkeeper asked,

"How is today's flavour?"

In response, while stuffing her cheeks with dango, Ferris nodded.

She tried to say that the flavour was perfect.

The flavour had gotten better than from before her journey.

Perhaps this dango was the closest to the ultimate dango, if such a thing existed.

She thought about that manner of things.

In that case, was there anything more she could wish for?

Then, staring at the Ferris with her cheeks stuffed with dango, the shopkeeper asked with a nervous expression, "But Lady Ferris, are you going on another journey to find the ultimate dango?"

To those words...

Ferris, with her cheeks full of dango, looked down at her feet.

There lay, prepared by the shopkeeper beforehand, seven tightly packed backpacks of dango.

Then Ferris looked up at the sky.

Without a cloud in the sky, the sun rose.

Today's weather would surely be nice.

There was practically no better weather for dango.

It would be nice to have a dango party with Iris, Arua, and Kuku in the Eris house garden.

As she thought, there was nothing that she lacked.

Nothing that she could wish for...

However, she gulped down the dango.

Lifting up the seven backpacks at her feet,

"... No, today I'm going a journey to find and punish a fool."

After saying that, she...

With a faint expression that nobody would be able to read, she smiled.

